

MASTERS OF DETECTION

This volume contains

THE ~~CANARY~~ MURDER CASE
THE DEATH OF LAURENCE VINING
THE DANGERFIELD TALISMAN

MASTERS OF DETECTION



LONDON
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**THE CANARY MURDER
CASE**

By the Same Author



THE BENSON MURDER CASE
THE GREENE MURDER CASE

THE CANARY MURDER CASE

BY •

S. S. VAN DINE



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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE "CANARY" - - - -	7
II. FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW - - - -	14
III. THE MURDER - - - -	21
IV. THE PRINT OF A HAND - - - -	34
V. THE BOITED DOOR - - - -	46
VI. A CALL FOR HELP - - - -	54
VII. A NAMELESS VISITOR - - - -	62
VIII. THE INVISIBLE MURDERER - - - -	71
IX. THE PACK IN FULL CRY - - - -	78
X. A FORCED INTERVIEW - - - -	91
XI. SEEKING INFORMATION - - - -	101
XII. CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE - - - -	111
XIII. AN ERSTWHILE GAILANT - - - -	119
XIV. VANCE OUTLINES A THEORY - - - -	128
XV. FOUR POSSIBILITIES - - - -	137
XVI. SIGNIFICANT DISCLOSURES - - - -	145
XVII. CHUCKING AN ALIBI - - - -	155
XVIII. THE TRAP - - - -	164
XIX. THE DOCTOR EXPLAINS - - - -	172
XX. A MIDNIGHT WITNESS - - - -	181
XXI. A CONTRADICTION IN DATES - - - -	190
XXII. A TELEPHONE CALL - - - -	200
XXIII. THE TEN O'CLOCK APPOINTMENT - - - -	211
XXIV. AN ARREST - - - -	219
XXV. VANCE DEMONSTRATES - - - -	229
XXVI. RECONSTRUCTING THE CRIME - - - -	239
XXVII. A GAME OF POKER - - - -	249
XXVIII. THE GUILTY MAN - - - -	259
XXIX. BELTHOVEN'S "ANDANTE" - - - -	269
XXX. THE END - - - -	280

THE CANARY MURDER CASE

Chapter I

THE "CANARY"

IN the offices of the Homicide Bureau of the Detective Division of the New York Police Department, on the third floor of the Police Headquarters building in Center Street, there is a large steel filing cabinet; and within it, among thousands of others of its kind, there reposes a small green index-card on which is typed: "*ODELL, MARGARET 184 West 71st Street. Sept. 10. Murder: Strangled about 11 p.m. Apartment ransacked. Jewelry stolen. Body found by Amy Gibson, maid.*"

Here, in a few commonplace words, is the bleak, unadorned statement of one of the most astonishing crimes in the police annals of this country—a crime so contradictory, so baffling, so ingenious, so unique, that for many days the best minds of the Police Department and the District Attorney's office were completely at a loss as to even a method of approach. Each line of investigation only tended to prove that Margaret Odell could not possibly have been murdered. And yet, huddled on the great silken

davenport in her living-room lay the girl's strangled body, giving the lie to so grotesque a conclusion

The true story of this crime, as it eventually came to light after a disheartening period of utter darkness and confusion, revealed many strange and bizarre ramifications, many dark recesses of man's unexplored nature, and the uncanny subtlety of a human mind sharpened by desperate and tragic despair. And it also revealed a hidden page of passionnal melodrama which, in its essence and organisms, was no less romantic and fascinating than that vivid, theatrical section of the *Comédie Humaine* which deals with the fabulous love of Baron Nucingen for Esther van Gobseck, and with the unhappy Torpille's tragic death

Margaret Odell was a product of the bohemian *demi-monde* of Broadway—a scintillant figure who seemed somehow to typify the gaudy and spurious romance of transient gaiety. For nearly two years before her death she had been the most conspicuous and, in a sense, popular figure of the city's night life. In our grandparents' day she might have had conferred upon her that somewhat questionable designation, "the toast of the town." But to-day there are too many aspirants for this classification, too many cliques and violent schisms in the Lepidoptera of our caté life, to permit of any one competitor being thus singled out. But, for all the darlings of both professional and lay press-agents, Margaret Odell was a character of unquestioned fame in her little world

Her notoriety was due in part to certain legendary tales of her affairs with one or two obscure potentates in the back-washes of Europe. She had spent two years abroad after her first success in "The Bretonne Maid"—a popular musical comedy in which she had been mysteriously raised from obscurity to the rank of "star"—and, one may cynically imagine, her press-agent took full advantage of her absence to circulate vermilion tales of her conquests.

Her appearance went far toward sustaining her somewhat

equivocal fame. There was no question that she was beautiful in a hard, flamboyant way. I remember seeing her dancing one night at the Antlers Club—a famous rendezvous for post-midnight pleasure-seekers, run by the notorious Red Raegan.¹ She impressed me then as a girl of uncommon loveliness, despite the calculating, predatory caste of her features. She was of medium height, slender, graceful in a leonine way, and, I thought, a trifle aloof and even haughty in manner—a result, perhaps, of her reputed association with European royalty. She had the traditional courtesan's full, red lips, and the wide, mongoose eyes of Rosetti's "Blessed Damsel." There was in her face that strange combination of sensual promise and spiritual renunciation with which the painters of all ages have sought to endow their conceptions of the Eternal Magdalene. Hers was the type of face, voluptuous and with a hint of mystery, which rules man's emotions and, by subjugating his mind, drives him to desperate deeds.

Margaret Odell had received the sobriquet of Canary as a result of a part she had played in an elaborate ornithological ballet of the "Follies," in which each girl had been gowned to represent a variety of bird. To her had fallen the rôle of canary; and her costume of white-and-yellow satin, together with her mass of shining golden hair and pink and-white complexion, had distinguished her in the eyes of the spectators as a creature of outstanding charm. Before a fortnight had passed—so eulogistic were her press notices, and so unerringly did the audience single her out for applause—the "Bird Ballet" was changed to the "Canary Ballet," and Miss Odell was promoted to the rank of what might charitably be called *première danseuse*, at the same time having a solo waltz and a song² interpolated for the special display of her charms and talents.

¹ The Antlers Club has since been closed by the police; and Red Raegan is now serving a long term in Sing Sing for grand larceny.

² Written especially for her by B. G. De Sylva.

She had quitted the "Follies" at the close of the season, and during her subsequent spectacular career in the haunts of Broadway's night life she had been popularly and familiarly called the Canary. Thus it happened that when her dead body was found, brutally strangled, in her apartment, the crime immediately became known, and was always thereafter referred to, as the Canary murder.

My own participation in the investigation of the Canary murder case—or rather my role of Boswellian spectator—constituted one of the most memorable experiences of my life. At the time of Margaret Odell's murder John H. V. Markham was District Attorney of New York having taken office the preceding January. I need hardly remind you that during the forty years of his incumbency he distinguished himself by his almost unnumbered successes as a criminal investigator. The price which was constantly accreted to him, however, was his ill-disputed reputation for integrity and a keen sense of honour which instinctively shrank from accepting credit for meritorious work not wholly his own. The truth is that Markham played only a small part in the majority of his most famous successes. In each instance he had solicitors engaged to conduct Markham's very close friends, who refused, at the time, to permit the facts to be made public.

This man was a young social aristocrat whom, for purposes of anonymity, I have chosen to call Philip Vance.

Vance had many interesting gifts and capabilities. He was an intellectual in small way, fine in appearance, and a profound student of rhetoric and psychology. Although an American he had not been educated in Europe, and still retained slight English accent and pronunciation. He had a liberal independent opinion, and spent considerable time fulfilling the social obligations which devolved on him as a result of family connections. But he was neither an idler nor a dilettante. His manner was cynical and aloof,

those who met him only casually, set him down as a snob. But knowing Vance, as I did, intimately, I was able to glimpse the real man beneath the surface indications ; and I knew that his cynicism and aloofness, far from being a pose, sprang instinctively from a nature which was at once sensitive and solitary.

Vance was not yet thirty-five, and, in a cold, sculptural fashion, was impressively good-looking. His face was slender and mobile ; but there was a stern, sardonic expression to his features, which acted as a barrier between him and his fellows. He was not emotionless, but his emotions were, in the main, intellectual. He was often criticised for his asceticism, yet I have seen him exhibit rare bursts of enthusiasm over an æsthetic or psychological problem. However, he gave the impression of remaining remote from all mundane matters ; and, in truth, he looked upon life like a dispassionate and impersonal spectator at a play, secretly amused and debonairly cynical at the meaningless futility of it all. Withal, he had a mind avid for knowledge, and few details of the human comedy that came within his sphere of vision escaped him.

It was as a direct result of this intellectual inquisitiveness that he became actively, though unofficially, interested in Markham's criminal investigations.

I kept a fairly complete record of the cases in which Vance participated as a kind of *amicus curiæ*, little thinking that I would ever be privileged to make them public ; but Markham, after being defeated, as you remember, on a hopelessly split ticket at the next election, withdrew from politics ; and last year Vance went abroad to live, declaring he would never return to America. As a result, I obtained permission from both of them to publish my notes in full. Vance stipulated only that I should not reveal his name ; but otherwise no restrictions were placed upon me.

I have related elsewhere¹ the peculiar circumstances

¹ "The Benson Murder Case"

which led to Vance's participation in criminal research, and how, in the face of almost insuperable contradictory evidence, he solved the mysterious shooting of Alvin Benson. The present chronicle deals with his solution of Margaret Odell's murder, which took place in the early fall of the same year, and which, you will recall, created an even greater sensation than its predecessor.¹

A curious set of circumstances was accountable for the way in which Vance was shouldered with this new investigation. Markham for weeks had been badgered by the anti-administration newspapers for the signal failures of his office in obtaining convictions against certain underworld offenders whom the police had turned over to him for prosecution. As a result of prohibition a new and dangerous and wholly undesirable kind of night life had sprung up in New York. A large number of well-financed cabarets, calling themselves night clubs, had made their appearance along Broadway and in its side streets; and already there had been an appalling number of serious crimes, both passionnal and monetary, which, it was said, had had their inception in these unsavory resorts.

At last, when a case of murder accompanying a hold-up and jewel robbery in one of the family hotels up-town was traced directly to plans and preparations made in one of the night clubs, and when two detectives of the Homicide Bureau investigating the case were found dead one morning in the neighbourhood of the club, with bullet wounds in their backs, Markham decided to pigeonhole the other

¹ The Loeb-Leopold crime, the Dorothy King case, and the Hall Mills murder came later, but the Canary murder proved tully as conspicuous a case as the Nan Patterson-"Caesar" Young affair, Durant's murder of Blanche Lamont and Minnie Williams in San Francisco, the Molineux arsenic-poisoning case, and the Carlyle Harris morphine murder. To find a parallel in point of public interest one must recall the Borden double-murder in Fall River, The Thaw case, the shooting of Elwell, and the Rosenthal murder.

affairs of his office and take a hand personally in the intolerable criminal conditions that had arisen.¹

¹ The case referred to here was that of Mrs. Elinor Quiggly, a wealthy widow living at the Adlon Hotel in West 96th Street. She was found on the morning of September 5th suffocated by a gag which had been placed on her by robbers who had evidently followed her home from the Club Turque—a small but luxurious all night cafe at 290 West 48th Street. The killing of the two detectives, McQuade and Carnison, was, the police believe, due to the fact that they were in possession of incriminating evidence against the perpetrators of the crime. Jewellery amounting to over \$5,000 was taken from the Quiggly apartment.

Chapter II

FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW

(Sunday, September 9th)

ON the day following his decision, Markham and Vance and I were sitting in a secluded corner of the lounge-room of the Stuyvesant Club. We often came together there, for we were all members of the Club, and Markham frequently used it as a kind of unofficial up town headquarters.

"It's bad enough to have half the people in this city under the impression that the District Attorney's office is a kind of high-class collection agency," he remarked that night, "without being necessitated to turn detective because I'm not given sufficient evidence, or the right kind of evidence, with which to secure convictions."

Vance looked up with a slow smile, and regarded him quizzically.

"The difficulty would seem to be," he returned, with an indolent drawl, "that the police, being unversed in the exquisite abracadabra of legal procedure, labour under the notion that evidence which would convince a man of ordin'ry intelligence, would also convince a court of law. A silly notion, don't y' know. Lawyers don't really want evidence: they want erudite technicalities. And the average policeman's brain is too forthright to cope with the pedantic demands of judicial evidence."

"It's not as bad as that," Markham retorted, with an attempt at good nature, although the strain of the past few

¹ The Stuyvesant was a large club, somewhat in the nature of a glorified hotel; and its extensive membership was drawn largely from the political, legal, and financial ranks.

weeks had tended to upset his habitual equanimity. "If there weren't rules of evidence, grave injustice would too often be done innocent persons. And even a criminal is entitled to protection in our courts."

Vance yawned mildly.

"Markham, you should have been a pedagogue. It's positively amazin' how you've mastered all the standard oratorical replies to criticism. And yet, I'm unconvinced. You remember the Wisconsin case of the kidnapped man whom the court declared presumably dead. Even when he reappeared, hale and hearty, among his former neighbours his status of being presumably dead was not legally altered. The visible and demonstrable fact that he was actually alive was regarded by the court as an immaterial and impertinent side-issue¹. . . Then there's the 'toughin' situation—prevalent in this fair country—of a man being insane in one State and sane in another. . . Really, y' know, you can't expect a mere lay intelligence, unskilled in the benign processes of legal logic, to perceive such subtle nuances. Your layman, swaddled in the darkness of ordinary common sense, would say that a person who is a lunatic on one bank of a river would still be a lunatic if he was on the opposite bank. And he'd also hold—erroneously, no doubt—that if a man was living, he would presumably be alive."

"Why this academic dissertation?" asked Markham, this time a bit irritably.

"It seems to touch rather vitally on the source of your present predicament," Vance explained equably. "The police, not being lawyers, have apparently got you into hot water, what? . . . Why not start an agitation to send all detectives to law school?"

"You're a great help," retorted Markham.

Vance raised his eyebrows slightly.

"Why disparage my suggestion? Surely you must perceive that it has merit. A man without legal training

¹ The case to which Vance referred, I ascertained later, was *Shatterham v. Shatterham*, 172 Mich. 29—a testamentary case.

when he knows a thing to be true, ignores all incompetent testimony to the contr'y, and clings to the facts. A court of law listens solemnly to a mass of worthless testimony, and renders a decision not on the facts but according to a complicated set of rules. The result, d' ye see, is that a court often acquits a prisoner, realising full well that he is guilty. Many a judge has said, in effect, to a culprit: 'I know, and the jury knows, that you committed the crime, but in view of the legally admissible evidence, I declare you innocent. Go and sin again.'"

Markham grunted. "I'd hardly endear myself to the people of this county if I answered the current strictures against me by recommending law courses for the Police Department."

"Permit me, then, to suggest the alternative of Shakespeare's butcher: 'Let's kill all the lawyers!'"

"Unfortunately, it's a situation, not a utopian theory, that has to be met."

"And just how," asked Vance lazily, "do you propose to reconcile the sensible conclusions of the police with what you touchingly call correctness of legal procedure?"

"To begin with," Markham informed him, "I've decided henceforth to do my own investigating of all important night-club criminal cases. I called a conference of the heads of my departments yesterday, and from now on there's going to be some real activity radiating direct from my office. I intend to produce the kind of evidence I need for convictions."

Vance slowly took a cigarette from his case and tapped it on the arm of his chair.

"Ah! So you are going to substitute the conviction of the innocent for the acquittal of the guilty?"

Markham was nettled; turning in his chair he frowned at Vance.

"I won't pretend not to understand your remark," he said acidulously. "You're back again on your favourite theme of the inadequacy of circumstantial evidence as

compared with your psychological theories and æsthetic hypotheses ”

“Quite so,” agreed Vance carelessly. “V^y know, Markham, your sweet and charmin’ faith in circumstantial evidence is positively disarming. Before it, the ordin’ry powers of ratiocination are benumbed. I tremble for the innocent victims you are about to gather into your legal net. You’ll eventually make the mere attendance at any cabaret a frightful hazard.”

Markham smoked a while in silence. Despite the seeming bitterness at times in the discussions of these two men, there was at bottom no animosity in their attitude toward each other. Their friendship was of long standing, and, despite the dissimilarity of their temperaments and the marked difference in their points of view, a profound mutual respect formed the basis of their intimate relationship.

At length Markham spoke

“Why this sweeping deprecation of circumstantial evidence? I admit that at times it may be misleading; but it often forms powerful presumptive proof of guilt. Indeed, Vance, one of our greatest legal authorities, has demonstrated that it is the most powerful actual evidence in existence. Direct evidence, in the very nature of crime, is almost always unavailable. If the courts had to depend on it, the great majority of criminals would still be at large.”

“I was under the impression that this precious majority had always enjoyed its untrammelled freedom.”

Markham ignored the interruption.

“Take this example: A dozen adults see an animal running across the snow, and testify that it was a chicken; whereas a child sees the same animal, and declares it was a duck. They thereupon examine the animal’s footprints and find them to be the web-footed tracks made by a duck. Is it not conclusive, then, that the animal was a duck and not a chicken, despite the preponderance of direct evidence?”

“I’ll grant you your duck,” acceded Vance indifferently.

"And having gratefully accepted the gift," pursued Markham, "I propound a corollary: A dozen adults see a human figure crossing the snow, and take oath it was a woman; whereas a child asserts that the figure was a man. Now, will you not also grant that the circumstantial evidence of a man's footprints in the snow would supply incontrovertible proof that it was, in fact, a man, and not a woman?"

"Not at all, my dear Justinian," replied Vance stretching his legs languidly in front of him, "unless, of course, you could show that a human being possesses no higher order of brains than a duck."

"What have brains to do with it?" Markham asked impatiently. "Brains don't affect one's footprints."

"Not those of a duck, certainly. But the brains might very well—and no doubt, often do—affect the footprints of a human being."

"Am I bringing a lesson in anthropology, Darwinian adaptability, or merely metaphysical speculation?"

"In none of those abstruse subjects," Vance assured him. "I'm merely stating a simple fact culled from observation."

"Well, according to your highly and peculiarly developed processes of reasoning, would the circumstantial evidence of those masculine footprints indicate a man or a woman?"

"Not necessarily either," Vance answered. "or, rather, a possibility of each. Such evidence, when applied to a human being—to a creature, that is, with a reasonable mind—would merely mean to me that the figure crossing the snow was either a man in his own shoes, or a woman in man's shoes; or perhaps, even, a long-legged child. In short, it would convey to my purely unlegal intelligence only that the tracks were made by some descendant of the *Pithecanthropus erectus* wearing men's shoes on his nether limbs—sex and age unknown. A duck's spoor, on the other hand, I might be tempted to take at their face value."

"I'm delighted to observe," said Markham "that, at

least, you repudiate the possibility of a duck dressing itself up in the gardener's boots."

Vance was silent for a moment; then he said:

"The trouble with you modern Solons, d' ye see, is that you attempt to reduce human nature to a formula; whereas the truth is that man, like life, is infinitely complex. He's shrewd and tricky—skilled for centuries in all the most diabolical chicaneries. He is a creature of low cunning, who, even in the normal course of his vain and idiotic struggle for existence, instinctively and deliberately tells ninety-nine lies to one truth. A duck, not having had the heaven-kissing advantages of human civilisation, is a straightforward and eminently honest bird."

"How," asked Markham, "since you jettison all the ordinary means of arriving at a conclusion, would you decide the sex or species of this person who left the masculine footprints in the snow?"

Vance blew a spiral of smoke toward the ceiling.

"First, I'd repudiate all the evidence of the twelve astigmatic adults and the one bright-eyed child. Next, I'd ignore the footprints in the snow. Then, with a mind unprejudiced by dubious testimony and uncluttered with material clues, I'd determine the exact nature of the crime which this fleeing person had committed. After having analysed it various factors, I could infallibly tell you not only whether the culprit was a man or a woman, but I could describe his habits, character, and personality. And I could do all this whether the fleeing figure left male or female or kangaroo tracks, or used stilts, or rode off on a velocipede, or levitated without leaving tracks at all."

Markham smiled broadly. "You'd be worse than the police in the matter of supplying me legal evidence, I fear."

"I, at least, wouldn't procure evidence against some unsuspecting person whose boots had been appropriated by the real culprit," retorted Vance. "And y' know, Markham, as long as you put your faith to footprints you'll inevitably

arrest just those persons whom the actual criminals want you to—namely, persons who have had nothing to do with the criminal conditions you're about to investigate."

He became suddenly serious.

"See here, old man; there are some shrewd intelligences at present allied with what the theologians call the powers of darkness. The surface appearances of many of these crimes that are worrying you are palpably deceptive. Personally, I don't put much stock in the theory that a malevolent gang of cut-throats have organised an American camorra, and made the silly night clubs their headquarters. The idea is too melodramatic. It smacks too much of the gaudy journalistic imagination: it's too Eugène Sue-ish. Crime isn't a mass instinct except during war-time, and then it's merely an obscene sport. Crime, d' ye see, is a personal and individual business. One doesn't make up a *parti carré* for a murder as one does for a bridge game. . . . Markham, old dear, don't let this romantic criminological idea lead you astray. And don't scrutinise the figurative footprints in the snow too closely. They'll confuse you most horribly—you're far too trustin' and literal for this wicked world. I warn you that no clever criminal is going to leave his own footprints for your tape-measure and calipers."

He sighed deeply, and gave Markham a look of bantering commiseration.

"And have you paused to consider that your first case may even be devoid of footprints? . . . Alas! What, then, will you do?"

"I could overcome that difficulty by taking you along with me," suggested Markham, with a touch of irony. "How would you like to accompany me on the next important case that breaks?"

"I am ravished by the idea," said Vance.

Two days later the front pages of our metropolitan press carried glaring headlines telling of the murder of Margaret Odell.

Chapter III

THE MURDER

(Tuesday, September 11th, 8 30 a.m.)

It was barely half-past eight on that momentous morning of September the 11th when Markham brought word to us of the event.

I was living temporarily with Vance at his home in East 38th Street--a large remodelled apartment occupying the two top floors of a beautiful mansion. For several years I had been Vance's personal legal representative and adviser, having resigned from my father's law firm of Van Dine, Davis and Van Dine to devote myself to his needs and interests. His affairs were by no means voluminous, but his personal finances, together with his numerous purchases of paintings and *objets d'art*, occupied my full time without burdening me. This monetary and legal stewardship was eminently congenial to my tastes; and my friendship with Vance, which had dated from our undergraduate days at Harvard, supplied the social and human element in an arrangement which otherwise might easily have degenerated into one of mere drab routine.

On this particular morning I had risen early and was working in the library when Currie, Vance's valet and majordomo, announced Markham's presence in the living-room. I was considerably astonished at this early morning visit, for Markham well knew that Vance, who rarely rose before noon, resented any intrusion upon his matutinal slumbers. And in that moment I received the curious impression that something unusual and portentous was toward.

I found Markham pacing restlessly up and down, his hat and gloves thrown carelessly on the centre-table. As I entered he halted and looked at me with harassed eyes. He was a moderately tall man, clean-shaven, grey-haired, and firmly set up. His appearance was distinguished, and his manner courteous and kindly. But beneath his gracious exterior there was an aggressive sternness, an indomitable, grim strength, that gave one the sense of dogged efficiency and untiring capability.

"Good morning, Van," he greeted me, with impatient perfunctoriness. "There's been another half world murder—the worst and ugliest thus far. . . ." He hesitated and regarded me searchingly. "You recall my chat with Vance at the club the other night? There was something damned prophetic in his remarks. And you remember I had promised to take him along on the next important case. Well, the case has broken with a vengeance. Margaret Odell, whom they called the Canary, has been strangled in her apartment: and from what I just got over the phone, it looks like another night-club affair. I'm headed for the Odell apartment now. . . . What about rousing out the sybarite?"

"By all means," I agreed, with an alacrity which, I fear was in large measure prompted by purely selfish motives. The Canary! If one had sought the city over for a victim whose murder would stir up excitement, there could have been but few selections better calculated to produce this result.

Hastening to the door, I summoned Currie, and told him to call Vance at once.

"I'm afraid, sir ——" began Currie, politely he int.

"Calm your fears," cut in Markham. "I'll take all responsibility for waking him at this inopportune hour."

Currie sensed an emergency and departed.

A minute or two later Vance, in an elaborately embroidered silk kimono and sandals, appeared at the living-room door.

"My word!" he greeted us, in mild astonishment, glancing at the clock. "Haven't you chaps gone to bed yet?"

He strolled to the mantel, and selected a gold-tipped *Régie* cigarette from a small Florentine humidor.

Markham's eyes narrowed: he was in no mood for levity.

"The Canary has been murdered," I blurted out.

Vance held his wax vesta poised, and gave me a look of indolent inquisitiveness. "Whose canary?"

"Margaret Odell was found strangled this morning," amended Markham brusquely. "Even *you*, wrapped in your scented cotton-wool, have heard of her. And you can realise the significance of the crime. I'm personally going to look for those footprints in the snow; and if you want to come along, as you intimated the other night, you'll have to get a move on."

Vance crushed out his cigarette.

"Margaret Odell, eh? Blot away's blonde Aspasia—or was it Pnyne who had the *coiffure d'or*? . . . Most distressing!" Despite his offhand manner, I could see he was deeply interested. "The base enemies of law and order are determined to chivy you most horribly, aren't they, old dear? Dence! Inconsiderate of 'em! . . . Excuse me while I seek habiliments suitable to the occasion."

He disappeared into his bedroom, while Markham took out a large cigar and resolutely prepared it for smoking, and I returned to the library to put away the papers on which I had been working.

In less than ten minutes Vance reappeared, dressed for the street.

"*Bon, mon vieux*," he announced gaily, as Curtie handed him his hat and gloves and a malacca cane. "*Allons-y!*"

We rode up-town along Madison Avenue, turned into Central Park, and came out by the West 72nd Street entrance. Margaret Odell's apartment was at 184 West 71st Street, near Broadway: and as we drew up to the curb, it was necessary for the patrolman on duty to make a passage

for us through the crowd that had already gathered as a result of the arrival of the police.

Feathergill, an assistant District Attorney, was waiting in the main hall for his Chief's arrival.

"It's too bad, sir," he lamented. "A rotten show all round. And just at this time! . . ." He shrugged his shoulders discouragingly.

"It may collapse quickly," said Markham, shaking the other's hand. "How are things going? Sergeant Heath phoned me right after you called, and said that, at first glance, the case looked a bit stubborn."

"Stubborn?" repeated Feathergill lugubriously. "It's downright impervious. Heath is spinning round like a turbine. He was called off the Boyle case, by the way, to devote his talents to this new shocker. Inspector Moran arrived ten minutes ago, and gave him the official imprimatur."

"Well, Heath's a good man," declared Markham. "We'll work it out . . . Which is the apartment?"

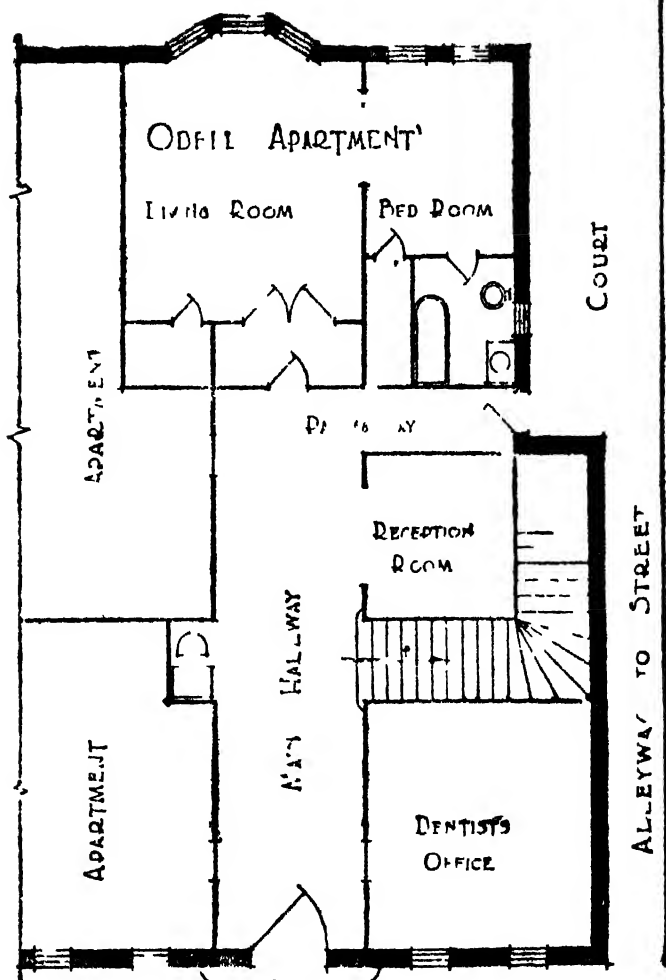
Feathergill led the way to a door at the rear of the main hall.

"Here you are, sir," he announced. "I'll be running along now. I need sleep. Good luck!" And he was gone.

It will be necessary to give a brief description of the house and its interior arrangement, for the somewhat peculiar structure of the building played a vital part in the seemingly insoluble problem posed by the murder.

The house, which was a four-story stone structure originally built as a residence, had been remodelled, both inside and outside, to meet the requirements of an exclusive individual apartment dwelling. There were, I believe, three or four separate suites on each floor; but the quarters upstairs need not concern us. The main floor was the scene of the crime, and here there were three apartments and a dentist's office.

The main entrance to the building was directly on the street, and extending straight back from the front door was



WEST SEVENTY-FIRST STREET

a wide hallway. Directly at the rear of this hallway, and facing the entrance, was the door to the Odell apartment, which bore the numeral "3." About half-way down the front hall, on the right-hand side, was the stairway leading to the floors above; and directly beyond the stairway, also on the right, was a small reception-room with a wide archway instead of a door. Directly opposite to the stairway, in a small recess, stood the telephone switchboard. There was no elevator in the house.

Another important feature of this ground-floor plan was a small passage-way at the rear of the main hall and at right angles to it, which led past the front walls of the Odell apartment to a door opening on a court at the west side of the building. This court was connected with the street by an alley four feet wide.

In the accompanying diagram this arrangement of the ground floor can be easily visualised, and I suggest that the reader fix it in his mind; for I doubt if ever before so simple and obvious an architectural design played such an important part in a criminal mystery. By its very simplicity and almost conventional familiarity—indeed, by its total lack of any puzzling complications—it proved so baffling to the investigators that the case threatened, for many days, to remain forever insoluble.

As Markham entered the Odell apartment that morning Sergeant Ernest Heath came forward at once and extended his hand. A look of relief passed over his broad, pugnacious features; and it was obvious that the animosity and rivalry which always exist between the Detective Division and the District Attorney's office during the investigation of any criminal case had no place in his attitude on this occasion.

"I'm glad you've come, sir," he said; and meant it.

He then turned to Vance with a cordial smile, and held out his hand.¹

¹ Heath had become acquainted with Vance during the investigation of the Benson murder case two months previous.

"So the amachoor sleuth is with us again!" His tone held a friendly banter.

"Oh, quite," murmured Vance. "How's your induction coil working this beautiful September morning, Sergeant?"

"I'd hate to tell you!" Then Heath's face grew suddenly grave, and he turned to Markham. "It's a raw deal, sir. Why in hell couldn't they have picked some one besides the Canary for their dirty work? There's plenty of Janes on Broadway who could've faded from the picture without causing a second alarm; but they gotta go and bump off the Queen of Sheba!"

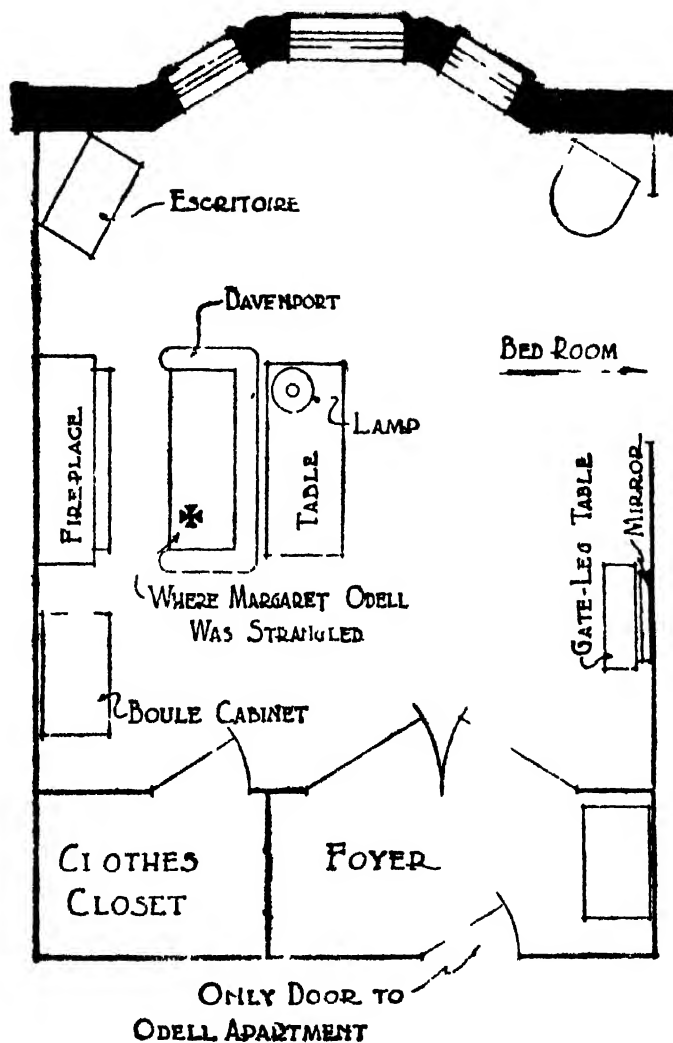
As he spoke, William A. Moran, the commanding officer of the Detective Bureau, came into the little foyer and performed the usual hand shaking ceremony. Though he had met Vance and the but once before, and then casually, he remembered us both and addressed us courteously by name.

"Your arrival," he said to Markham, in a well bred, modulated voice, "is very welcome. Sergeant Heath will give you what preliminary information you want. I'm still pretty much in the dark myself, only just arrived."

"A lot of information I've got to give," grumbled Heath, as he led the way into the living-room.

Margaret Odell's apartment was a suite of two fairly large rooms connected by a wide archway draped with heavy damask portières. The entrance door from the main hall of the building led into a small rectangular foyer about eight feet long and four feet deep with double Venetian-glass door opening into the main room beyond. There was no other entrance to the apartment, and the bedroom could be reached only through the archway from the living room.

There was a large divan port, covered with brocaded silk, in front of the fireplace in the left hand wall of the living room, with a long narrow library table of inlaid rosewood extending along its back. On the opposite wall, between the foyer and the archway into the bedroom, hung a triphcate Marie Antoinette mirror, beneath which stood a mahog-



any gate-legged table. On the far side of the archway, near the large oriel window, was a baby grand Steinway piano with a beautifully designed and decorated case of Louis-Seize ornamentation. In the corner to the right of the fireplace was a spindle-legged *escritoire* and a square hand-painted waste-paper basket of vellum. To the left of the fireplace stood one of the loveliest *Boule* cabinets I have ever seen. Several excellent reproductions of Boucher, Fragonard, and Watteau hung about the walls. The bedroom contained a chest of drawers, a dressing table, and several gold leaf chairs. The whole apartment seemed eminently in keeping with the Canary's fragile and evanescent personality.

As we stepped from the little foyer into the living room and stood for a moment looking about, a scene bordering on wreckage met our eyes. The rooms had apparently been ransacked by some one in a frenzy of haste, and the disorder of the place was appalling.

"They didn't exactly do the job in dainty fashion," remarked Inspector Moran.

"I suppose we ought to be grateful they didn't blow the joint up with dynamite," returned Heath acridly.

But it was not the general disorder that most attracted us. Our gaze was almost immediately drawn and held by the body of the dead girl, which rested in an unnatural, semi-recumbent attitude in the corner of the davenport nearest to where we stood. Her head was turned backward, as if by force, over the silken tufted upholstery; and her hair had come unfastened and lay beneath her head and over her bare shoulder like a frozen cataract of liquid gold. Her face, in violent death, was distorted and unlovely. Her skin was discoloured, her eyes were staring, her mouth was open, and her lips were drawn back. Her neck, on either side of the thyroid cartilage, showed ugly dark bruises. She was dressed in a flimsy evening gown of black Chantilly lace over cream-coloured chiffon, and across the arm of the

davenport had been thrown an evening cape of cloth-of-gold trimmed with ermine

There were evidences of her ineffectual struggle with the persons who had strangled her. Besides the dishevelled condition of her hair, one of the shoulder-straps of her gown had been severed, and there was a long rent in the fine lace across her breast. A small corsage of artificial orchids had been torn from her bodice, and lay crumpled in her lap. One satin slipper had fallen off, and her right knee was twisted inward on the seat of the davenport, as if she had sought to lift herself out of the suffocating clutches of her antagonist. Her fingers were still flexed, no doubt as they had been at the moment of her capitulation to death, when she had relinquished her grip upon the murderer's wrists.

The spell of horror cast over us by the sight of the tortured body was broken by the matter-of-fact tones of Heath.

"You see, Mr. Markham, she was evidently sitting in the corner of this settee when she was grabbed suddenly from behind."

Markham nodded. "It must have taken a pretty strong man to strangle her so easily."

"I'll say!" agreed Heath. He bent over and pointed to the girl's finger, on which showed several abrasions. "They stripped her rings off, too; and they didn't go about it gentle, either." Then he indicated a segment of fine platinum chain, set with tiny pearls, which hung over one of her shoulders. "And they grabbed whatever it was hanging round her neck, and broke the chain doing it. They weren't overlooking anything, or losing any time . . . A swell gentlemanly job. Nice and refined."

"Where's the Medical Examiner?" asked Markham.

"He's coming," Heath told him. "You can't get Doc Doremus to go anywheres without his breakfast."

"He may find something else—something that doesn't show."

"There's plenty showing for me," declared Heath.

"Look at this apartment. It wouldn't be much worse if a Kansas cyclone had struck it."

We turned from the depressing spectacle of the dead girl and moved toward the centre of the room.

"Be careful not to touch anything, Mr. Markham," warned Heath. "I've sent for the finger-print experts—they'll be here any minute now."

Vance looked up in mock astonishment.

"Finger-prints? You don't say—really! How delightful!—Imagine a johnnie in this enlightened day leaving his finger prints for you to find."

"All crooks aren't clever, Mr. Vance," declared Heath combatively.

"Oh, dear, no! They'd never be apprehended if they were. But, after all, Sergeant, even an authentic finger-print match means that the person who made it was dallying around at some time or other. It doesn't indicate guilt."

"Maybe so," conceded Heath doggedly. "But I'm here to tell you that if I get any good honest to God finger-prints outa this devastated area, it's not going so easy with the bird that made 'em."

Vance appeared to be shocked. "You positively terrify me, Sergeant. Henceforth I shall adopt mittens as a permanent addition to my attire. I'm always handling the furniture and the teacups and the various knickknacks in the houses where I call, don't y' know."

Markham interposed himself at this point, and suggested they make a tour of inspection while waiting for the Medical Examiner.

"They didn't add anything much to the usual methods," Heath pointed out. "Killed the girl, and then ripped things wide open."

The two rooms had apparently been thoroughly ransacked. Clothes and various articles were strewn about the floor. The doors of both clothes-closets (there was one in

each room) were open, and to judge from the chaos in the bedroom closet it had been hurriedly searched; although the closet off of the living room, which was given over to the storage of infrequently used items, appeared to have been ignored. The drawers of the dressing-table and chest had been partly emptied on to the floor, and the bedclothes had been snatched away and the mattress turned back. Two chairs and a small occasional table were upset; several vases were broken, as if they had been searched and then thrown down in the wrath of disappointment; and the Marie Antoinette mirror had been broken. The *escritoire* was open, and its pigeonholes had been emptied in a jumbled pile upon the blotter. The doors of the *Boule* cabinet swung wide, and inside there was the same confusion of contents that marked the interior of the *escritoire*. The bronze-and porcelain lamp on the end of the library-table was lying on its side, its satin shade torn where it had struck the sharp corner of a silver *bonbonniere*.

Two objects in the general disarray, particularly attracted my attention—a black metal document box of the kind purchasable at any stationery store, and a large jewel case of sheet steel with a circular inset lock. The latter of these objects was destined to play a curious and sinister part in the investigation to follow.

The document-box, which was now empty, had been placed on the library-table, next to the overturned lamp. Its lid was thrown back, and the key was still in the lock. In all the litter and dis-organisation of the room, this box seemed to be the one outstanding indication of calm and orderly activity on the part of the wrecker.

The jewel-case, on the other hand, had been violently wrenched open. It sat on the dressing-table in the bedroom, dented and twisted out of shape by the terrific leverage that had been necessary to force it, and beside it lay a brass-handled, cast-iron poker which had evidently been brought

from the living-room and used as a makeshift chisel with which to prize open the lock.

Vance had glanced but casually at the different objects in the rooms as we made our rounds, but when he came to the dressing-table, he paused abruptly. Taking out his monocle, he adjusted it carefully, and leaned over the broken jewel-case.

"Most extr'ordin'ry!" he murmured, tapping the edge of the lid with his gold pencil "What do you make of that, Sergeant?"

Heath had been eyeing Vance with narrowed lids as the latter bent over the dressing-table.

"What's in your mind, Mr. Vance?" he, in turn, asked.

"Oh, more than you could ever guess," Vance answered lightly. "But just at the moment I was toying with the idea that this steel case was never torn open by that wholly inadequate iron poker, what?"

Heath nodded his head approvingly. "So you, too, noticed that, did you? . . . And you're dead right. That poker might've twisted the box a little, but it never snapped that lock."

He turned to Inspector Moran.

"That's the puzzler I've sent for 'Prof.' Brenner to clean up—if he can. The jimmying of that jewel-case looks to me like a high-class professional job. No Sunday-school superintendent did it."

Vance continued for a while to study the box, but at length he turned away with a perplexed frown.

"I say!" he commented. "Something devilish qucer took place here last night."

"Oh, not so queer," Heath amended. "It was a thorough job, all right, but there's nothing mysterious about it."

Vance polished his monocle and put it away.

"If you go to work on that basis, Sergeant," he returned carelessly, "I greatly fear you'll run aground on a reef. And may kind Heaven bring you safe to shore!"

Chapter IV

THE PRINT OF A HAND

(Tuesday, September 11th, 9.30 a.m.)

A few minutes after we had returned to the living-room Doctor Doremus, the Chief Medical Examiner, arrived, jaunty and energetic. Immediately in his train came three other men, one of whom carried a bulky camera and a folded tripod. These were Captain Dubois and Detective Bellamy, finger-print experts, and Peter Quackenbush, the official photographer.

"Well, well, well!" exclaimed Doctor Doremus. "Quite a gathering of the clans. More trouble, eh? . . . I wish your friends, Inspector, would choose a more respectable hour for their little differences. This early rising upsets my liver."

He shook hands with everybody in a brisk, businesslike manner.

"Where's the body?" he demanded breezily, looking about the room. He caught sight of the girl on the davenport. "Ah! A lady."

Stepping quickly forward, he made a rapid examination of the dead girl, scrutinising her neck and fingers, moving her arms and head to determine the condition of *rigor mortis*, and finally unflexing her stiffened limbs and laying her out straight on the long cushions, preparatory to a more detailed necropsy.

The rest of us moved toward the bedroom, and Heath motioned to the finger-print men to follow.

"Go over everything," he told them. "But take a special look at this jewel-case and the handle of this poker, and give that document-box in the other room a close up-and-down."

"Right," assented Captain Dubois. "We'll begin in here while the Doc's busy in the other room." And he and Bellamy set to work.

Our interest naturally centred on the Captain's labours. For fully five minutes we watched him inspecting the twisted steel sides of the jewel-case and the smooth, polished handle of the poker. He held the objects gingerly by their edges, and, placing a jeweller's glass in his eye, flashed his pocket-light on every square inch of them. At length he put them down, scowling.

"No finger-prints here," he announced. "Wiped clean."

"I mighta known it," grumbled Heath. "It was a professional job, all right." He turned to the other expert. "Found anything, Bellamy?"

"Nothing to help," was the grumpy reply. "A few old smears with dust over 'em."

"Looks like a wash-out," Heath commented irritably; "though I'm hoping for something in the other room."

At this moment Doctor Doremus came into the bedroom and, taking a sheet from the bed, returned to the davenport and covered the body of the murdered girl. Then he snapped shut his case, and putting on his hat at a rakish angle, stepped forward with the air of a man in great haste to be on his way.

"Simple case of strangulation from behind," he said, his words running together. "Digital bruises about the front of the throat; thumb bruises in the sub-occipital region. Attack must have been unexpected. A quick, competent job, though deceased evidently battled a little."

"How do you suppose her dress became torn, Doctor?" asked Vance.

"Oh, that? Can't tell. She may have done it herself—instinctive motions of clutching for it."

"Not likely though, what?"

"Why not? The dress was torn and the bouquet was ripped off, and the fellow who was choking her had both hands on her throat. Who else could've done it?"

Vance shrugged his shoulders, and began lighting a cigarette

Heath, annoyed by his apparently inconsequential interruption, put the next question.

"Don't those marks on the fingers mean that her rings were stripped off?"

"Possibly. They're fresh abrasions. Also, there's a couple of lacerations on the left wrist and slight contusions on the thenar eminence, indicating that a bracelet may have been forcibly pulled over her hand."

"That fits O. K.," pronounced Heath, with satisfaction. "And it looks like they snatched a pendant of some kind off her neck."

"Probably," indifferently agreed Doctor Doremus. "The piece of chain had cut into her flesh a little behind the right shoulder."

"And the time?"

"Nine or ten hours ago. Say, about eleven-thirty—maybe a little before. Not after midnight, anyway." He had been teetering restlessly on his toes. "Anything else?"

Heath pondered.

"I guess that's all, Doc," he decided. "I'll get the body to the mortuary right away. Let's have the post-mortem as soon as you can."

"You'll get a report in the morning." And despite his apparent eagerness to be off, Doctor Doremus stepped into the bedroom, and shook hands with Heath and Markham and Inspector Moran before he hurried out.

Heath followed him to the door, and I heard him direct the officer outside to telephone the Department of Public Welfare to send an ambulance at once for the girl's body.

"I positively adore that official archiatel of yours," Vance

said to Markham. "Such detachment! Here are you stewing most distressingly over the passing of one damsel fair and frail, and that blithe *medicus* is worrying only over a sluggish liver brought on by early rising."

"What has he to be upset over?" complained Markham. "The newspapers are not riding him with spurs. . . . And by the way, what was the point of your questions about the torn dress?"

Vance lazily inspected the tip of his cigarette.

"Consider," he said. "The lady was evidently taken by surprise; for, had there been a struggle beforehand, she would not have been strangled from behind while sitting down. Therefore, her gown and corsage were undoubtedly intact at the time she was seized. But—despite the conclusion of your dashing Paracelsus—the damage to her toilet was not of a nature that could have been self-inflicted in her struggle for air. If she had felt the constriction of the gown across her breast, she would have snatched the bodice itself by putting her fingers inside the band. But, if you noticed, her bodice was intact; the only thing that had been torn was the deep lace flounce on the outside; and it had been torn, or rather ripped, by a strong lateral pull; whereas, in the circumstances, any wrench on her part would have been downward or outward."

Inspector Moran was listening intently, but Heath seemed restless and impatient; apparently he regarded the torn gown as irrelevant to the simple main issue.

"Moreover," Vance went on, "there is the corsage. If she herself had torn it off while being strangled, it would doubtless have fallen to the floor, for, remember, she offered considerable resistance. Her body was twisted sideways; her knee was drawn up, and one slipper had been kicked off. Now, no bunch of silken posies is going to remain in a lady's lap during such a commotion. Even when ladies sit still, their gloves and hand-bags and handkerchiefs and

programmes and serviettes are forever sliding off of their laps on to the floor, don't y' know."

"But if your argument's correct," protested Markham, "then the tearing of the lace and the snatching off of the corsage could have been done only after she was dead. And I can't see any object in such senseless vandalism."

"Neither can I," sighed Vance. "It's all devilish queer."

Heath looked up at him sharply. "That's the second time you've said that. But there's nothing what you'd call queer about this mess. It is a straight-away case." He spoke with an overtone of insistence, like a man arguing against his own insecurity of opinion. "The dress might've been torn almost any time," he went on stubbornly. "And the flower might've got caught in the lace of her skirt so it couldn't roll off."

"And how would you explain the jewel-case, Sergeant?" asked Vance.

"Well, the fellow might've tried the poker, and then, finding it wouldn't work, used his jimmy."

"If he had the efficient jimmy," countered Vance, "why did he go to the trouble of bringing the silly poker from the living-room?"

The Sergeant shook his head perplexedly.

"You never can tell why some of these crooks act the way they do."

"Tut, tut!" Vance chided him. "There should be no such word as 'never' in the bright lexicon of detecting."

Heath regarded him sharply. "Was there anything else that struck you as queer?" His subtle doubts were welling up again.

"Well, there's the lamp on the table in the other room."

We were standing near the archway between the two rooms, and Heath turned quickly and looked blankly at the fallen lamp.

"I don't see anything queer about that."

"It has been upset—eh, what?" suggested Vance.

"What if it has?" Heath was frankly puzzled. "Damn near everything in this apartment has been knocked crooked."

"Ah! But there's a reason for most of the other things having been disturbed—like the drawers and pigeonholes and closets and vases. They all indicate a search; they're consistent with a raid for loot. But that lamp, now, d'ye see, doesn't fit into the picture. It's a false note. It was standing on the opposite end of the table to where the murder was committed, at least five feet away; and it couldn't possibly have been knocked over in the struggle. . . . No, it won't do. It's got no business being upset, any more than that pretty mirror over the gate-legged table has any business being broken. That's why it's queer."

"What about those chairs and the little table?" asked Heath, pointing to two small gilded chairs which had been overturned, and a fragile tip-table that lay on its side near the piano.

"Oh, they fit into the ensemble," returned Vance. "They're all light pieces of furniture which could easily have been knocked over, or thrown aside, by the hasty gentleman who rifled these rooms."

"The lamp might've been knocked over in the same way," argued Heath.

Vance shook his head. "Not terrible, Sergeant. It has a solid bronze base, and isn't at all top-heavy; and being set well back on the table, it wasn't in any one's way. . . . That lamp was upset deliberately."

The Sergeant was silent for a while. Experience had taught him not to underestimate Vance's observations; and, I must confess, as I looked at the lamp lying on its side on the end of the library table, well removed from any of the other disordered objects in the room, Vance's argument seemed to possess considerable force. I tried hard to fit it into a hasty reconstruction of the crime, but was utterly unable to do so.

"Anything else that don't seem to fit into the picture?" Heath at length asked

Vance pointed with his cigarette toward the clothes-closet in the living-room. This closet was alongside of the foyer, in the corner near the Boule cabinet, directly opposite to the end of the davenport.

"You might let your mind dally a moment with the condition of that clothes-press," suggested Vance carelessly. "You will note that, though the door's ajar, the contents have not been touched. And it's about the only area in the apartment that hasn't been disturbed."

Heath walked over and looked into the closet.

"Well, anyway, I'll admit that's queer," he finally conceded.

Vance had followed him indolently, and stood gazing over his shoulder.

"And my word!" he exclaimed suddenly. "The key's on the inside of the lock. Fancy that, now! One can't lock a closet door with the key on the inside—can one, Sergeant?"

"The key may not mean anything," Heath observed hopefully. "Maybe the door was never locked. Anyhow, we'll find out about that pretty soon. I'm holding the maid outside, and I'm going to have her on the carpet as soon as the Captain finishes his job here."

He turned to Duhois, who, having completed his search for finger-prints in the bedroom, was now inspecting the piano.

"Any luck yet?"

The Captain shook his head.

"Gloves," he answered succinctly.

"Same here," supplemented Bellamy gruffly, on his knees before the escritoire.

Vance, with a sardonic smile, turned and walked to the window, where he stood looking out and smoking placidly, as if his entire interest in the case had evaporated.

At this moment the door from the main hall opened, and

a short thin little man, with grey hair and a scraggly grey beard, stepped inside and stood blinking against the vivid sunlight.

"Good morning, Professor," Heath greeted the newcomer. "Glad to see you. I've got something nifty, right in your line."

Deputy-Inspector Conrad Brenner was one of that small army of obscure, but highly capable, experts who are connected with the New York Police Department, and who are constantly being consulted on abstruse technical problems, but whose names and achievements rarely get into the public prints. His speciality was locks and burglars' tools; and I doubt if, even among those exhaustively painstaking criminologists of the University of Lausanne, there was a more accurate reader of the evidential signs left by the implements of house-breakers. In appearance and bearing he was like a withered little college professor.¹ His black, unpressed suit was old-fashioned in cut, and he wore a very high stiff collar, like a *fin-de-siècle* clergyman, with a narrow black string tie. His gold-rimmed spectacles were so thick-lensed that the pupils of his eyes gave the impression of acute belladonna poisoning.

When Heath had spoken to him, he merely stood staring with a sort of detached expectancy; he seemed utterly unaware that there was anyone else in the room. The Sergeant, evidently familiar with the little man's idiosyncrasies of manner, did not wait for a response, but started at once for the bedroom.

"This way, please, Professor," he directed cajolingly, going to the dressing-table, and picking up the jewel-case. "Take a squint at this, and tell me what you see."

Inspector Brenner followed Heath, without looking to right or left, and, taking the jewel-case, went silently to

¹ It is an interesting fact that for the nineteen years he had been connected with the New York Police Department, he had been referred to, by his superiors and subordinates alike, as "the Professor."

the window and began to examine it. Vance, whose interest seemed suddenly to be reawakened, came forward and stood watching him.

For fully five minutes the little expert inspected the case, holding it within a few inches of his myopic eyes. Then he lifted his glance to Heath and winked several times rapidly.

"Two instruments were used in opening this case." His voice was small and high-pitched, but there was in it an undeniable quality of authority. "One bent the lid and made several fractures on the baked enamel. The other was, I should say, a steel chisel of some kind, and was used to break the lock. The first instrument, which was blunt, was employed amateurishly, at the wrong angle of leverage, and the effort resulted only in twisting the overhang of the lid. But the steel chisel was used with a knowledge of the correct point of oscillation, where a minimum of leverage would produce the counteracting stress necessary to displace the lock-bolts."

"A professional job?" suggested Heath.

"Highly so," answered the Inspector, again blinking. "That is to say, the forcing of the lock was professional. And I would even go so far as to advance the opinion that the instrument used was one especially constructed for such illegal purposes."

"Could this have done the job?" Heath held out the poker.

The other looked at it closely, and turned it over several times.

"It might have been the instrument that bent the cover, but it was not the one used for prying open the lock. This poker is cast iron and would have snapped under any great pressure; whereas this box is of cold rolled eighteen gauge steel plate, with an inset cylinder pin tumbler lock taking a paracentric key. The leverage force necessary to distort the flange sufficiently to lift the lid could have been made only by a steel chisel."

"Well, that's that." Heath seemed well satisfied with Inspector Brenner's conclusion. "I'll send the box down to you, Professor, and you can let me know what else you find out."

"I'll take it along, if you have no objection." And the little man tucked it under his arm and shuffled out without another word.

Heath grinned at Markham. "Queer bird. He ain't happy unless he's measuring jimmy marks on doors and windows and things. He couldn't wait till I sent him the box. He'll hold it lovingly on his lap all the way down in the subway, like a mother with a baby."

Vance was still standing near the dressing-table, gazing perplexedly into space.

"Markham," he said, "the condition of that jewel-case is positively astounding. It's unreasonable, illogical—insane. It complicates the situation most damnably. That steel box simply couldn't have been chiselled open by a professional burglar . . . and yet, don't y' know, it actually was."

Before Markham could reply, a satisfied grunt from Captain Dubois attracted our attention.

"I've got something for you, Sergeant," he announced.

We moved expectantly into the living-room. Dubois was bending over the end of the library-table almost directly behind the place where Margaret Odell's body had been found. He took out an insufflator, which was like a very small hand bellows, and blew a fine light-yellow powder evenly over about a square foot of the polished rosewood surface of the table-top. Then he gently blew away the surplus powder, and there appeared the impression of a human hand distinctly registered in saffron. The bulb of the thumb and each fleshy hummock between the joints of the fingers and around the palm stood out like tiny circular islands. All the papillary ridges were clearly discernible. The photographer then hooked his camera to a

peculiar adjustable tripod and, carefully focussing his lens, took two flash-light pictures of the hand-mark.

"This ought to do." Dubois was pleased with his find. "It's the right hand—a clear print—and the guy who made it was standing right behind the dame. . . . And it's the newest print in the place."

"What about this box?" Heath pointed to the black document-box on the table near the overturned lamp.

"Not a mark—wiped clean."

Dubois began putting away his paraphernalia.

"I say, Captain Dubois," interposed Vance, "did you take a good look at the inside door-knob of that clothes-dress?"

The man swung about abruptly, and gave Vance a glowering look.

"People ain't in the habit of handling the inside knobs of closet doors. They open and shut closets from the outside."

Vance raised his eyebrows in simulated astonishment.

"Do they, now, really?—Fancy that! . . . Still, don't y' know, if one were in ide the closet, one couldn't reach the outside knob."

"The people I know don't shut themselves in clothes-closets." Dubois's tone was ponderously sarcastic.

"You positively amaze me!" declared Vance. "All the people I know are addicted to the habit—a sort of daily pastime, don't y' know."

Markham, always diplomatic, intervened.

"What idea have you about that closet, Vance?"

"Alas! I wish I had one," was the dolorous answer. "It's because I can't, for the life of me, make sense of its neat and orderly appearance that I'm so interested in it. Really, y' know, it should have been artistically looted."

Heath was not entirely free from the same vague misgivings that were disturbing Vance, for he turned to Dubois and said:

"You might go over the knob, Captain. As this gentleman says, there's something funny about the condition of that closet."

Dubois, silent and surly, went to the closet door and sprayed his yellow powder over the inside knob. When he had blown the loose particles away, he bent over it with his magnifying-glass. At length he straightened up, and gave Vance a look of ill-natured appraisal.

"There's fresh prints on it, all right," he grudgingly admitted; "and unless I'm mistaken they were made by the same hand as those on the table. Both thumb-marks are ulnar loops, and the index-fingers are both whorl patterns. . . . Here, Pete," he ordered the photographer, "make some shots of that knob."

When this had been done, Dubois, Bellamy, and the photographer left us.

A few moments later, after an interchange of pleasantries, Inspector Moran also departed. At the door he passed two men in the white uniform of internes, who had come to take away the girl's body.

Chapter V

THE BOLTED DOOR

(Tuesday, September 11th: 10 30 a.m.)

MARKHAM and Heath and Vance and I were now alone in the apartment. Dark, low-hanging clouds had drifted across the sun, and the grey spectral light intensified the tragic atmosphere of the rooms. Markham had lighted a cigar, and stood leaning against the piano, looking about him with a disconsolate but determined air. Vance had moved over to one of the pictures on the side wall of the living-room—Boucher's "La Bergere Endormie." I think it was—and stood looking at it with cynical contempt.

"Dimpled nudities, gambolling Cupids, and woolly clouds for royal cocottes," he commented. His distaste for all the painting of the French decadence under Louis XV was profound. "One wonders what pictures courtesans hung in their boudoirs before the invention of these amorous eclogues, with their blue verdure and beribboned sheep."

"I'm more interested at present in what took place in this particular boudoir last night," retorted Markham impatiently.

"There's not much doubt about that, sir," said Heath encouragingly. "And I've an idea that when Dubois checks up those finger-prints with our files, we'll about know who did it."

Vance turned towards him with a mental smile.

"You're so trusting, Sergeant. I, in turn, have an idea that, long before this touchin' case is clarified, you'll wish

the irascible Captain with the insect-powder had never found those finger-prints." He made a playful gesture of emphasis. "Permit me to whisper into your ear that the person who left his sign-manuals on yonder rosewood table and cut-glass door-knob had nothing whatever to do with the precipitate demise of the fair Mademoiselle Odell."

"What is it you suspect?" demanded Markham sharply.

"Not a thing, old dear," blandly declared Vance. "I'm wandering about in a mental murk as empty of sign-posts as interplanetary space. The jaws of darkness do devour me up; I'm in the dead vast and middle of the night. My mental darkness is Egyptian, Stygian, Cimmerian—I'm in a perfect *Ecluse* of tenebrosity."

Markham's jaw tightened in exasperation. He was familiar with this evasive loquacity of Vance's. Dismissing the subject, he addressed himself to Heath.

"Have you done any questioning of the people in the house here?"

"I talked to Odell's maid and to the janitor and the switchboard operators, but I didn't go much into details—I was waiting for you. I'll say this, though: what they did tell me made my head swim. If they don't back down on some of their statements, we're up against it."

"Let's have them in now, then," suggested Markham; "the maid first." He sat down on the piano-bench with his back to the keyboard.

Heath rose, but instead of going to the door, walked to the oriel window.

"There's one thing I want to call your attention to, sir, before you interview these people, and that's the matter of entrances and exits in this apartment." He drew aside the gold-gauze curtain. "Look at that iron grating. All the windows in this place, including the ones in the bath-room, are equipped with iron bars just like these. It's only eight or ten feet to the ground here, and whoever built this

house wasn't taking any chances of burglars getting in through the windows."

He released the curtain, and strode into the foyer.

"Now, there's only one entrance to this apartment, and that's this door here opening off the main hall. There isn't a transom or an air-shaft or a dumb-waiter in the place, and that means that the only way—the *only way*—that anybody can get in or out of this apartment is through this door. Just keep that fact in your mind, sir, while you're listening to the stories of these people. . . . Now, I'll have the maid brought in."

In response to Heath's order a detective led in a mulatto woman about thirty years old. She was neatly dressed, and gave one the impression of capability. When she spoke it was with a quiet, clear enunciation which attested to a greater degree of education than is ordinarily found in members of her class.

Her name, we learned, was Amy Gibson, and the information elicited by Markham's preliminary questioning consisted of the following facts :

She had arrived at the apartment that morning a few minutes after seven and, as was her custom, had let herself in with her own key, as her mistress generally slept until late.

Once or twice a week she came early to do sewing and mending for Miss Odell before the latter rose. On this particular morning she had come early to make a alteration in a gown.

As soon as she had opened the door she had been confronted by the disorder of the apartment, for the Venetian-glass doors of the foyer were wide open, and almost simultaneously she had noticed the body of her mistress on the davenport.

She had called at once to Jessup, the night telephone operator then on duty, who, after one glance into the living-room had notified the police. She had then sat down in the public reception-room and waited for the arrival of the officers.

Her testimony had been simple and direct and intelligently stated. If she was nervous or excited, she managed to keep her feelings well under control.

"Now," continued Markham, after a short pause, "let us go back to last night.—At what time did you leave Miss Odell?"

"A few minutes before seven, sir," the woman answered, in a colourless, even tone which seemed to be characteristic of her speech.

"Is that your usual hour for leaving?"

"No; I generally go about six. But last night Miss Odell wanted me to help her dress for dinner."

"Don't you always help her dress for dinner?"

"No, sir. But last night she was going with some gentleman to dinner and the theatre, and wanted to look specially nice."

"Ah!" Markham leaned forward. "And who was this gentleman?"

"I don't know, sir—Miss Odell didn't say"

"And you couldn't suggest who it might have been?"

"I couldn't say, sir"

"And when did Miss Odell tell you that she wanted you to come early this morning?"

"When I was leaving last night."

"So she evidently didn't anticipate any danger, or have any fear of her companion."

"It doesn't look that way." The woman paused, as if considering. "No, I know she didn't. She was in good spirits."

Markham turned to Heath.

"Any other questions you want to ask, Sergeant?"

Heath removed an unlighted cigar from his mouth, and bent forward, resting his hands on his knees.

"What jewellery did this Odell woman have on last night?" he demanded gruffly.

The maid's manner became cool and a bit haughty.

"Miss Odell" she emphasised the "Miss," by way of reproaching him for the disrespect implied in his omission—"wore all her rings, five or six of them, and three bracelets

—one of square diamonds, one of rubies, and one of diamonds and emeralds. She also had on a sunburst of pear-shaped diamonds on a chain round her neck, and she carried a platinum lorgnette set with diamonds and pearls."

"Did she own any other jewellery?"

"A few small pieces, maybe, but I'm not sure."

"And did she keep 'em in a steel jewel-case in the bedroom?"

"Yes — when she wasn't wearing them." There was more than a suggestion of sarcasm in the reply.

"Oh, I thought maybe she kept 'em locked up when she had 'em on." Heath's antagonism had been aroused by the maid's attitude, he could not have failed to note that she had consistently omitted the punctilious "sir" when answering him. He now stood up and pointed loweringly to the black document-box on the rosewood table.

"Ever see that before?"

The woman nodded indifferently. "Many times."

"Where was it generally kept?"

"In that thing." She indicated the Boule cabinet with a motion of the head.

"What was in the box?"

"How should I know?"

"You don't know—huh?" Heath thrust out his jaw, but his bullying attitude had no effect upon the impulsive maid.

"I've got no idea," she replied firmly. "It was always kept locked, and I never saw Missodd open it."

The Sergeant walked over to the door of the living room closet.

"See that key?" he asked angrily.

Again the woman nodded; but this time I detected a look of mild astonishment in her eyes.

"Was that key always kept on the inside of the door?"

"No; it was always on the outside."

Heath shot Vance a curious look. Then, after a moment's

frowning contemplation of the knob, he waved his hand to the detective who had brought the maid in.

"Take her back to the reception-room, Snitkin, and get a detailed description from her of all the Odell jewellery. . . . And keep her outside; I'll want her again."

When Snitkin and the maid had gone out, Vance lay back lazily on the davenport, where he had sat during the interview, and sent a spiral of cigarette smoke toward the ceiling.

"Rather illuminatin', what?" he remarked. "The dusky demoiselle got us considerably forrader. Now we know that the closet key is on the wrong side of the door, and that our *fille de joie* went to the theatre with one of her favourite *inamorau*, who presumably brought her home shortly before she took her departure from this wicked world."

"You think that's helpful, do you?" Heath's tone was contemptuously triumphant. "Wait till you hear the crazy story the telephone operator's got to tell."

"All right, Sergeant," put in Markham impatiently. "Suppose we get on with the ordeal."

"I'm going to suggest, Mr. Markham, that we question the janitor first. And I'll show you why." Heath went to the entrance door of the apartment, and opened it. "Look here for just a minute, sir."

He stepped out into the main hall, and pointed down the little passageway on the left. It was about ten feet in length, and ran between the Odell apartment and the blank rear wall of the reception-room. At the end of it was a solid oak door which gave on the court at the side of the house.

"That door," explained Heath, "is the only side or rear entrance to this building; and when that door is bolted nobody can get into the house except by the front entrance. You can't even get into the building through the other apartments, for every window on this floor is barred. I checked up on that point as soon as I got here."

He led the way back into the living-room.

"Now, after I'd looked over the situation this morning," he

went on, "I figured that our man had entered through that side door at the end of the passageway, and had slipped into this apartment without the night operator seeing him. So I tried the side door to see if it was open. But it was bolted on the inside—not locked, mind you, but bolted. And it wasn't a slip-bolt, either, that could have been jimmied or worked open from the outside, but a tough old-fashioned turn-bolt of solid brass. . . . And now I want you to hear what the janitor's got to say about it."

Markham nodded acquiescence, and Heath called an order to one of the officers in the hall. A moment later a stolid, middle-aged German, with sullen features and high cheekbones, stood before us. His jaw was clamped tight, and he shifted his eyes from one to the other of us suspiciously.

Heath straightway assumed the role of inquisitor.

"What time do you leave here at night?" He had, for some reason, assumed a belligerent manner.

"Six o'clock—sometimes earlier, sometimes later." The man spoke in a surly monotone. He was obviously resentful at this unexpected intrusion upon his orderly routine.

"And what time do you get here in the morning?"

"Eight o'clock, regular."

"What time did you go home last night?"

"About six—maybe quarter past."

Heath paused and finally lighted the cigar on which he had been chewing at intervals during the past hour.

"Now, tell me about that side door," he went on, with undiminished aggressiveness. "You told me you lock it every night before you leave—is that right?"

"Ja—that's right." The man nodded his head affirmatively several times. "Only I don't lock it—I bolt it."

"All right, you bolt it, then." As Heath talked his cigar bobbed up and down between his lips; smoke and words came simultaneously from his mouth. "And last night you bolted it as usual about six o'clock?"

"Maybe a quarter past," the janitor amended, with Germanic precision.

"You're sure you bolted it last night?" The question was almost ferocious.

"Ja, ja. Sure, I am. I do it every night. I never miss."

The man's earnestness left no doubt that the door in question had indeed been bolted on the inside at about six o'clock on the previous evening. Heath, however, belaboured the point for several minutes, only to be reassured doggedly that the door had been bolted. At last the janitor was dismissed.

"Really, y'know, Sergeant," remarked Vance with an amused smile, "that honest Rheinlander bolted the door."

"Sure, he did," spluttered Heath; "and I found it still bolted this morning at quarter to eight. That's just what messes things up so nice and pretty. If that door was bolted from six o'clock last evening until eight o'clock this morning, I'd appreciate having someone drive up in a hearse and tell me how the Canary's little playmate got in here last night. And I'd also like to know how he got out."

"Why not through the main entrance?" asked Markham. "It seems the only logical way left, according to your own findings."

"That's how I had it figured out, sir," returned Heath. "But wait till you hear what the 'phone operator has to say."

"And the 'phone operator's post," mused Vance, "is in the main hall half-way between the front door and this apartment. Therefore, the gentleman who caused all the disturbance hereabouts last night would have had to pass within a few feet of the operator both on arriving and departing—eh, what?"

"That's it!" snapped Heath. "And, according to the operator, no such person came or went."

Markham seemed to have absorbed some of Heath's irritability.

"Get the fellow in here, and let me question him," he ordered.

Heath obeyed with a kind of malicious alacrity.

Chapter VI

A CALL FOR HELP

(Tuesday, September 11 11 a.m.)

JESSUP made a good impression from the moment he entered the room. He was a serious, determined-looking man in his early thirties, rugged and well built, and there was a squareness to his shoulders that carried a suggestion of military training. He walked with a decided limp, his right foot dragged perceptibly—and I noted that his left arm had been stiffened into a permanent arc, as if by an unhealed fracture of the elbow. He was quiet and reserved, and his eyes were steady and intelligent. Markham at once motioned him to a wicker chair beside the closet door, but he declined it, and stood before the District Attorney in a soldierly attitude of respectful attention. Markham opened the interrogation with several perfunctory questions. It transpired that Jessup had been a sergeant in the World War,¹ had twice been seriously wounded, and had been invalided home shortly before the Armistice. He had held his present post of telephone operator for over a year.

"Now, Jessup," continued Markham, "there are things connected with last night's tragedy that you can tell us."

"Yes, sir." There was no doubt that this ex-soldier would tell us accurately anything he knew, and also that, if he had any doubt as to the correctness of his information, he would

¹ His full name was William Elmer Jessup, and he had been attached to the 308th Infantry of the 77th Division of the Overseas Forces.

frankly say so. He possessed all the qualities of a careful and well-trained witness.

"First of all, what time did you come on duty last night?"

"At ten o'clock, sir." There was no qualification to this blunt statement; one felt that Jessup would arrive punctually at whatever hour he was due. "It was my short shift. The day man and myself alternate in long and short shifts."

"And did you see Miss Odell come in last night after the theatre?"

"Yes, sir. Everyone who comes in has to pass the switch-board."

"What time did she arrive?"

"It couldn't have been more than a few minutes after eleven."

"Was she alone?"

"No, sir. There was a gentleman with her."

"Do you know who he was?"

"I don't know his name, sir. But I have seen him several times before when he has called on Miss Odell."

"You could describe him, I suppose."

"Yes, sir. He's tall and clean-shaven except for a very short grey moustache, and is about forty-five, I should say. He looks—it you understand me, sir—like a man of wealth and position."

Markham nodded. "And now, tell me: did he accompany Miss Odell into her apartment, or did he go immediately away?"

"He went in with Miss Odell, and stayed about half an hour."

Markham's eyes brightened, and there was a suppressed eagerness in his next words.

"Then he arrived about eleven, and was alone with Miss Odell in her apartment until about half past eleven. You're sure of these facts?"

"Yes, sir, that's correct," the man affirmed.

Markham paused and leaned forward.

"Now, Jessup, think carefully before answering: did anyone else call on Miss Odell at any time last night?"

"No one, sir," was the unhesitating reply.

"How can you be so sure?"

"I would have seen them, sir. They would have had to pass the switchboard in order to reach this apartment."

"And don't you ever leave the switchboard?" asked Markham.

"No, sir," the man assured him vigorously, as if protesting against the implication that he would desert a post of duty.

"When I want a drink of water, or go to the toilet, I use the little lavatory in the reception-room; but I always hold the door open and keep my eye on the switchboard in case the pilot-light should show up for a telephone call. Nobody could walk down the hall, even if I was in the lavatory, without my seeing them."

One could well believe that the conscientious Jessup kept his eye at all times on the switchboard lest a call should flash and go unanswered. The man's earnestness and reliability were obvious; and there was no doubt in any of our minds, I think, that if Miss Odell had had another visitor that night, Jessup would have known of it.

But Heath, with the thoroughness of his nature, rose quickly and stepped out into the main hall. In a moment he returned, looking troubled but satisfied.

"Right!" he nodded to Markham. "The lavatory door's on a direct unobstructed line with the switchboard."

Jessup took no notice of this verification of his statement, and stood, his eyes attentively on the District Attorney, awaiting any further questions that might be asked him. There was something both admirable and confidence-inspiring in his unruffled demeanour.

"What about last night?" resumed Markham. "Did you leave the switchboard often, or for long?"

"Just once, sir; and then only to go to the lavatory for a minute or two. But I watched the board the whole time."

"And you'd be willing to state on oath that no one else called on Miss Odell from ten o'clock on, and that no one, except her escort, left her apartment after that hour?"

"Yes, sir, I would."

He was plainly telling the truth, and Markham pondered several moments before proceeding.

"What about the side door?"

"That's kept locked all night, sir: The janitor bolts it when he leaves, and unbolts it in the morning. I never touch it."

Markham leaned back and turned to Heath.

"The testimony of the janitor and Jessup here," he said, "seems to limit the situation pretty narrowly to Miss Odell's escort. If, as seems reasonable to assume, the side door was bolted all night, and if no other caller came or went through the front door, it looks as if the man we wanted to find was the one who brought her home."

Heath gave a short mirthless laugh.

"That would be fine, sir, if something else hadn't happened around here last night." Then, to Jessup: "Tell the District Attorney the rest of the story about this man."

Markham looked toward the operator with expectant interest; and Vance, lifting himself on one elbow, listened attentively.

Jessup spoke in a level voice, with the alert and careful manner of a soldier reporting to his superior officer.

"It was just this, sir. When the gentleman came out of Miss Odell's apartment at about half past eleven, he stopped at the switchboard and asked me to get him a Yellow Taxicab. I put the call through, and while he was waiting for the car, Miss Odell screamed and called for help. The gentleman turned and rushed to the apartment door, and I followed quickly behind him. He knocked; but at first there was no answer. Then he knocked again, and at the same time called out to Miss Odell and asked her what was the matter. This time she answered. She said everything was all right, and told him to go home and not to worry. Then he walked back with

me to the switchboard, remarking that he guessed Miss Odell must have fallen asleep and had a nightmare. We talked for a few minutes about the war, and then the taxicab came. He said good-night, and went out, and I heard the car drive away."

It was plain to see that this epilogue of the departure of Miss Odell's anonymous escort completely upset Markham's theory of the case. He looked down at the floor with a baffled expression, and smoked vigorously for several moments. At last he asked :

"How long was it after this man came out of the apartment that you heard Miss Odell scream ? "

"About five minutes. I had put my connection through to the taxicab company, and it was a minute or so later that she screamed."

"Was the man near the switchboard ? "

"Yes, sir. In fact, he had one arm resting on it."

"How many times did Miss Odell scream ? And just what did she say when she called for help ? "

"She screamed twice, and then cried 'Help! Help!'"

"And when the man knocked on the door the second time, what did he say ? "

"As near as I can recollect, sir, he said : 'Open the door, Margaret! What's the trouble ? '"

"And can you remember her exact words when she answered him ? "

Jessup hesitated, and frowned reflectively.

"As I recall, she said: 'There's nothing the matter. I'm sorry I screamed. Everything's all right, so please go home, and don't worry.' . . . Of course, that may not be exactly what she said, but it was something very close to it"

"You could hear her plainly through the door, then ? "

"Oh, yes. These doors are not very thick."

Markham rose and began pacing meditatively. At length, halting in front of the operator, he asked another question :

"Did you hear any other suspicious sounds in this apartment after the man left?"

"Not a sound of any kind, sir," Jessup declared. "Someone from outside the building, however, telephoned Miss Odell about ten minutes later, and a man's voice answered from her apartment."

"What's this!" Markham spun round, and Heath sat up at attention, his eyes wide. "Tell me every detail of that call."

Jessup complied unemotionally.

"About twenty minutes to twelve a trunk-light flashed on the board, and when I answered it, a man asked for Miss Odell. I plugged the connection through, and after a short wait the receiver was lifted from her 'phone—you can tell when a receiver's taken off the hook, because the guide-light on the board goes out—and a man's voice answered 'Hello.' I pulled the listening-in key over, and, of course, didn't hear any more."

There was silence in the apartment for several minutes. Then Vance, who had been watching Jessup closely during the interview, spoke.

"By the by, Mr. Jessup," he asked carelessly, "were you yourself, by any chance, a bit fascinated—let us say—by the charms of Miss Odell?"

For the first time since entering the room the man appeared ill at ease. A dull flush overspread his cheek.

"I thought she was a very beautiful lady," he answered resolutely.

Markham gave Vance a look of disapproval, and then addressed himself abruptly to the operator.

"That will be all for the moment, please."

The man bowed stiffly and hung up.

"This case is becoming positively fascinating," murmured Vance, relaxing once more upon the davenport.

"It's comforting to know that someone's enjoying it," Markham's tone was irritable. "And what, may I ask, was

the object of your question concerning Jessup's sentiments toward the dead woman ? ”

“ Oh, just a vagrant notion struggling in my brain,” returned Vance “ And then, y’know, a bit of *boudoir racontage* always enlivens a situation, what ? ”

Heath, rousing himself from gloomy abstraction, spoke up.

“ We’ve still got the finger-prints, Mr Markham. And I’m thinking that they’re going to locate our man for us.”

“ But even if Dubois does identify those prints,” said Markham, “ we’ll have to show how the owner of them got into this place last night He’ll claim, of course, they were made prior to the crime.”

“ Well, it’s a sure thing,” declared Heath stubbornly, “ that there was some man in here last night when Odell got back from the theatre, and that he was still here until after the other man left at half past eleven The woman’s screams and the answering of that ’phone call at twenty minutes to twelve prove it And since Doc Doremus said that the murder took place before midnight, there’s no getting away from the fact that the guy who was hiding in here did the job ”

“ That appears incontrovertible,” agreed Markham “ And I’m inclined to think it was someone she knew She probably screamed when he first revealed himself, and then, recognising him, calmed down and told the other man out in the hall that nothing was the matter. . . . Later on he strangled her ”

“ And, I might suggest,” added Vance, “ that his place of hiding was that clothes-press.”

“ Sure,” the Sergeant concurred “ But what’s bothering me is how he got in here. The day operator who was at the switchboard until ten last night told me that the man who called and took Odell out to dinner was the only visitor she had.”

Markham gave a grunt of exasperation.

“ Bring the day man in here,” he ordered “ We’ve got to straighten this thing out. *Somebody* got in here last night, and before I leave I’m going to find out how it was done.”

Vance gave him a look of patronising amusement.

"Y'know, Markham," he said, "I'm not blessed with the gift of psychic inspiration, but I have one of those strange, indescribable feelings, as the minor poets say, that if you really contemplate remaining in this bestrewn boudoir till you've discovered how the mysterious visitor gained admittance here last night, you'd do jolly well to send for your toilet access'ries and several changes of fresh linen—not to mention your pyjan as The chap who engineered this little *source* planned his entrance and exit most carefully and perspicaciously"

Markham regarded Vance dubiously, but made no reply.

Chapter VII

A NAMELESS VISITOR

(Tuesday September 11th ; 11.15 a m)

HARTH had stepped out into the hall, and now returned with the day telephone operator, a sallow thin young man who, we learned, was named Spively. His almost black hair, which accentuated the pallor of his face, was sleeked back from his forehead with pomade; and he wore a very shallow moustache which barely extended beyond the ala of his nostrils. He was dressed in an exaggeratedly dapper fashion, with a dazzling chocolate coloured suit cut very close to his figure, a pair of cloth-topped buttoned shoes and a pink shirt with a stiff turn over collar to match. He appeared nervous, and immediately sat down in the wicker chair by the door, fingering the sharp crease of his trousers, and running the tip of his tongue over his lips.

Markham went straight to the point.

"I understand you were at the switchboard yesterday afternoon and last night until ten o'clock. Is that correct?"

Spively swallowed hard, and nodded his head. "Yes, sir."

"What time did Miss Odell go out to dinner?"

"About seven o'clock. I'd just sent to the restaurant next door for some sandwiches--"

"Did she go alone?" Markham interrupted his explanation.

"No. A fella called for her."

"Did you know what fella?"

"I'd seen him a couple of times calling on Miss Odell, but I didn't know who he was"

"What did he look like?" Markham's question was uttered with hurried impatience.

Spively's description of the girl's escort tallied with Jessup's description of the man who had accompanied her home, though Spively was more voluble and less precise than Jessup had been. Patently, Miss Odell had gone out at seven and returned at eleven with the same man.

"Now," resumed Markham, putting an added stress on his words, "I want to know who else called on Miss Odell between the time she went out to dinner and ten o'clock when you left the switchboard"

Spively was puzzled by the question, and his thin arched eyebrows lifted and contracted

"I don't understand," he stammered "How could anyone call on Miss Odell when she was out?"

"Someone evidently did," said Markham "And he got into her apartment, and was there when she returned at eleven."

The youth's eyes opened wide, and his lips fell apart.

"My God, sir!" he exclaimed "So that's how they murdered her!—but in wait for her! . . ." He stopped abruptly, suddenly realising his own proximity to the mysterious chain of events that had led up to the crime. "But nobody got into her apartment while I was on duty," he blurted with frightened emphasis. "Nobody! I never left the board from the time she went out until quitting time"

"Couldn't anyone have come in the side door?"

"What! Was it unlocked?" Spively's tone was startled. "It never is unlocked at night. The janitor bolts it when he leaves at six"

"And you didn't unbolt it last night for any purpose? Think!"

"No, sir, I didn't!" He shook his head earnestly.

"And you are positive that no one got into the apartment through the front door after Miss Odell left?"

"Positive! I tell you I didn't leave the board the whole time, and nobody could've got by me without my knowing it. There was only one person that called and asked for her——"

"Oh! So someone did call!" snapped Markham. "When was it? And what happened?—Jog your memory before you answer."

"It wasn't anything important," the youth assured him, genuinely frightened. "Just a fella who came in and rang her bell and went right out again"

"Never mind whether it was important or not" Markham's tone was cold and peremptory. "What time did he call?"

"About half-past nine."

"And who was he?"

"A young fella I've seen come here several times to see Miss Odell. I don't know his name."

"Tell me exactly what took place," pursued Markham. Again Spively swallowed hard and wetted his lips.

"It was like this," he began, with effort. "The fella came in and started walking down the hall, and I said to him: 'Miss Odell isn't in.' But he kept on going, and said: 'Oh, well, I'll ring the bell anyway to make sure.' A telephone call came through just then, and I let him go on. He rang the bell and knocked on the door, but of course there wasn't any answer; and pretty soon he came on back and said: 'I guess you were right.' Then he tossed me half a dollar, and went out."

"You actually saw him go out?" There was a note of disappointment in Markham's voice.

"Sure, I saw him go out. He stopped just inside the front door and lit a cigarette. Then he opened the door and turned toward Broadway."

"'One by one the rosy petals fall,' " came Vance's indolent voice. "A most amusin' situation!"

Markham was loath to relinquish his hope in the criminal possibilities of this one caller who had come and gone at half-past nine.

"What was this man like?" he asked. "Can you describe him?"

Spively sat up straight, and when he answered, it was with an enthusiasm that showed he had taken special note of the visitor.

"He was good-looking, not so old—maybe thirty. And he had on a full-dress suit and patent-leather pumps, and a pleated silk shirt——"

"What, what?" demanded Vance, in simulated unbelief, leaning over the back of the davenport. "A silk shirt with evening dress! Most ext'ordin'ry!"

"Oh, a lot of the best dressers are wearing them," Spively explained, with condescending pride. "It's all the fashion for dancing."

"You don't say--really!" Vance appeared dumbfounded. "I must look into this. . . . And, by the by, when this Beau Brummel of the silk shirt paused by the front door, did he take his cigarette from a long flat silver case carried in his lower waistcoat pocket?"

The youth looked at Vance in admiring astonishment.

"How did you know?" he exclaimed

"Simple deduction," Vance explained, resuming his recumbent posture. "Large metal cigarette-cases carried in the waistcoat pocket somehow go with silk shirts for evening wear."

Markham, clearly annoyed at the interruption, cut in sharply with a demand for the operator to proceed with his description.

"He wore his hair smoothed down," Spively continued, "and you could see it was kind of long; but it was cut in the latest style. And he had a small waxed moustache; and

there was a big carnation in the lapel of his coat, and he had on chamois gloves. . . ."

"My word!" murmured Vance. "A gigolo!"

Markham, with the incubus of the night clubs riding him heavily, frowned and took a deep breath. Vance's observation evidently had launched him on an unpleasant train of thought.

"Was this man short or tall?" he asked next.

"He wasn't so tall—about my height," Spivey explained.

"And he was sort of thin."

There was an easily recognisable undercurrent of admiration in his tone, and I felt that this youthful telephone operator had seen in Miss Odell's caller a certain physical and sartorial ideal. This palpable admiration, coupled with the somewhat *outré* clothes affected by the youth, permitted us to read between the lines of his remarks a fairly accurate description of the man who had unsuccessfully rung the dead girl's bell at half-past nine the night before.

When Spivey had been dismissed, Markham rose and strode about the room, his head enveloped in a cloud of cigar smoke, while Heath sat stolidly watching him, his brows knit.

Vance stood up and stretched himself.

"The absorbin' problem, it would seem, remains *in statu quo*," he remarked airily. "How, oh how, did the fair Margaret's executioner get in?"

"You know, Mr. Markham," rumbled Heath sententially, "I've been thinking that the fellow may have come here earlier in the afternoon—say, before that side door was locked. Odell herself may have let him in and hidden him when the other man came to take her to dinner."

"It looks that way," Markham admitted. "Bring the maid in here again, and we'll see what we can find out."

When the woman had been brought in, Markham questioned her as to her actions during the afternoon, and learned that she had gone out at about four to do some shopping, and had returned about half-past five.

"Did Miss Odell have any visitor with her when you got back?"

"No, sir," was the prompt answer. "She was alone."

"Did she mention that any one had called?"

"No, sir."

"Now," continued Markham, "could any one have been hidden in this apartment when you went home at seven?"

The maid was frankly astonished, and even a little horrified.

"Where could any one hide?" she asked, looking round the apartment.

"There are several possible places," Markham suggested "in the bathroom, in one of the clothes-closets, under the bed, behind the window draperies. . . ."

The woman shook her head decisively. "No one could have been hidden," she declared. "I was in the bathroom half a dozen times, and I got Miss Odell's gown out of the clothes-closet in the bedroom. As soon as it began to get dark I drew all the window-shades myself. And as for the bed, it's built almost down to the floor; no one could squeeze under it." (I glanced closely at the bed, and realised that this statement was quite true)

"What about the clothes-closet in this room?" Markham put the question hopefully, but again the maid shook her head.

"Nobody was in there. That's where I keep my own hat and coat, and I took them out myself when I was getting ready to go. I even put away one of Miss Odell's old dresses in that closet before I left."

"And you are absolutely certain," reiterated Markham, "that no one could have been hidden anywhere in these rooms at the time you went home?"

"Absolutely, sir."

"Do you happen to remember if the key of this clothes-closet was on the inside or the outside of the lock when you opened the door to get your hat?"

The woman paused, and looked thoughtfully at the closet door.

"It was on the outside, where it always was," she announced, after several moments' reflection. "I remember because it caught in the chiffon of the old dress I put away."

Markham frowned and then resumed his questioning.

"You say you don't know the name of Miss Odell's dinner companion last night. Can you tell us the names of any men she was in the habit of going out with?"

"Miss Odell never mentioned any names to me," the woman said. "She was very careful about it, too—secretive, you might say. You see, I'm only here in the daytime, and the gentlemen she knew generally came in the evening."

"And you never heard her speak of any one of whom she was frightened—any one she had reason to fear?"

"No, sir—although there was one man she was trying to get rid of. He was a bad character—I wouldn't have trusted him anywhere—and I told Miss Odell she'd better look out for him. But she'd known him a long time, I guess, and had been pretty soft on him once."

"How do you happen to know this?"

"One day, about a week ago," the maid explained, "I came in after lunch, and he was with her in the other room. They didn't hear me, because the portières were drawn. He was demanding money, and when she tried to put him off, he began threatening her. And she said something that showed she'd given him money before. I made a noise, and then they stopped arguing; and pretty soon he went out."

"What did this man look like?" Markham's interest was reviving.

"He was kind of thin—not very tall—and I'd say he was around thirty. He had a hard face—good-looking, some would say—and pale blue eyes that gave you the shivers. He always wore his hair greased back, and he had a little yellow moustache pointed at the ends."

"Ah!" said Vance. "Our gigolo!"

"Has this man been here since?" asked Markham.

"I don't know, sir—not when I was here."

"That will be all," said Markham; and the woman went out.

"She didn't help us much," complained Heath.

"What!" exclaimed Vance. "I think she did remarkably well. She cleared up several moot points."

"And just what portions of her information do you consider particularly illuminating?" asked Markham, with ill-conceived annoyance.

"We now know, do we not," rejoined Vance serenely, "that no one was lying *perdu* in here when the *bonne* departed yester evening."

"Instead of that fact being helpful," retorted Markham, "I'd say it added materially to the complications of the situation."

"It would appear that way, wouldn't it, now? But then—who knows?—it may prove to be your brightest and most comfortin' clue. . . . Furthermore, we learned that some one evidently locked himself in that clothes-press, as witness the shifting of the key, and that, moreover, this occultation did not occur until the abigail had gone, or let us say, after seven o'clock."

"Sure," said Heath with sour facetiousness; "when the side-door was bolted and an operator was sitting in the front hall, who swears nobody came in that way."

"It is a bit mystifyin'," Vance conceded sadly.

"Mystifying? It's impossible!" grumbled Markham.

Heath, who was now staring with meditative pugnacity into the closet, shook his head helplessly.

"What I don't understand," he ruminated, "is why, if the fellow was hiding in the closet, he didn't ransack it when he came out, like he did all the rest of the apartment."

"Sergeant," said Vance, "you've put your finger on the crux of the matter. . . . Y' know, the neat, undisturbed aspect of that closet rather suggests that the crude person

who rifled these charming rooms omitted to give it his attention because it was locked on the inside and he couldn't open it."

"Come, come!" protested Markham. "That theory implies that there were two unknown persons in here last night."

Vance sighed. "Harrow and alas! I know it. And we can't introduce even one into this apartment logically. . . . Distressin', ain't it?"

Heath sought consolation in a new line of thought.

"Anyway," he submitted, "we know that the fancy fellow with the patent-leather pumps who called here last night at half-past nine was probably Odell's lover, and was grafting on her."

"And in just what recondite way does that obvious fact help to roll the clouds away?" asked Vance. "Nearly every modern Delilah has an avaricious *amoro*. It would be rather singular if there wasn't such a chap in the offing, what?"

"That's all right, too," returned Heath. "But I'll tell you something, Mr. Vance, that maybe you don't know. The men that these girls lose their heads over are generally crooks of some kind—professional criminals, you understand. That's why, knowing that this job was the work of a professional, it don't leave me cold, as you might say, to learn that this fellow who was threatening Odell and grafting on her was the same one who was prowling round here last night. . . . And I'll say this, too: the description of him sounds a whole lot like the kind of high-class burglars that hang out at these swell all-night cafés."

"You're convinced, then," asked Vance mildly, "that this job, as you call it, was done by a professional criminal?"

Heath was almost contemptuous in his reply. "Didn't the guy wear gloves, and use a jimmy? It was a yeggman's job, all right."

Chapter VIII

THE INVISIBLE MURDERER

(Tuesday, September 11th, 11.45 a.m.)

MARKHAM went to the window and stood, his hands behind him, looking down into the little paved rear yard. After several minutes he turned slowly.

"The situation, as I see it," he said, "boils down to this: The Odell girl has an engagement for dinner and the theatre with a man of some distinction. He calls for her a little after seven, and they go out together. At eleven o'clock they return. He goes with her into her apartment and remains half an hour. He leaves at half-past eleven and asks the phone operator to call him a taxi. While he is waiting the girl screams and calls for help, and, in response to his inquiries, she tells him nothing is wrong and bids him go away. The taxi arrives, and he departs in it. Ten minutes later some one telephones her, and a man answers from her apartment. This morning she is found murdered, and the apartment ransacked."

He took a long draw on his cigar.

"Now, it is obvious that when she and her escort returned last night, there was another man in this place somewhere; and it is also obvious that the girl was alive after her escort had departed. Therefore, we must conclude that the man who was already in the apartment was the person who murdered her. This conclusion is further corroborated by Doctor Doremus's report that the crime occurred between eleven and twelve. But since her escort did not leave

till half-past eleven, and spoke with her after that time, we can put the actual hour of the murder as between half past eleven and midnight. These are the inferable facts from the evidence thus far adduced."

"There's not much getting away from 'em," agreed Heath

"At any rate, they're interestin'," murmured Vance Markham, walking up and down earnestly, continued

"The features of the situation revolving round these inferable facts are as follows. There was no one hiding in the apartment at seven o'clock—the hour the maid went home. Therefore, the murderer entered the apartment later. First then, let us consider the side door. At six o'clock, an hour before the maid's departure, the janitor bolted it on the inside, and both operators disavowed emphatically that they went near it. Moreover, you Sergeant, found it bolted this morning. Hence, we may assume that the door was bolted on the inside all night, and that nobody could have entered that way. Consequently, we are driven to the inevitable alternative that the murderer entered by the front door. Now, let us consider this other means of entry. The phone operator who was on duty until ten o'clock last night asserts positively that the only person who entered the front door and passed down the main hall to this apartment was a man who rang the bell and, getting no answer, immediately walked out again. The other operator, who was on duty from ten o'clock until this morning, asserts with equal positiveness that no one entered the front door and passed the switchboard coming to this apartment. Add to all this the fact that every window on this floor is barred, and that no one from upstairs can descend into the main hall without coming face to face with the operator, and we are, for the moment, confronted with an impasse."

Heath scratched his head, and laughed mirthlessly.

"It don't make sense, does it, sir?"

"What about the next apartment?" asked Vance, "the one with the door facing the rear passageway—No. 2, I think?"

Heath turned to him patronisingly. "I looked into that the first thing this morning. Apartment No. 2 is occupied by a single woman; and I woke her up at eight o'clock and searched the place. Nothing there. Anyway, you have to walk past the switchboard to reach her apartment the same as you do to reach this one; and nobody called on her or left her apartment last night. What's more, Jessup, who's a shrewd sound lad, told me this woman is a quiet lady-like sort, and that she and Odell didn't ever know each other."

"You're so thorough, Sergeant!" murmured Vance.

"Of course," put in Markham, "it would have been possible for someone from the other apartment to have slipped in here behind the operator's back between seven and eleven, and then to have slipped back after the murder. But as Sergeant Heath's search this morning failed to uncover anyone, we can eliminate the possibility of our man having operated from that quarter."

"I dare say you're right," Vance indifferently admitted. "But it strikes me, Markham old dear, that your own affectin' recapitulation of the situation jolly well eliminates the possibility of your man's having operated from any quarter. . . . And yet he came in, garroted the unfortunate damsel, and departed—eh, what? . . . It's a charmin' little problem. I wouldn't have missed it for worlds."

"It's uncanny," pronounced Markham gloomily.

"It's positively spiritualistic," amended Vance. "It has the caressin' odour of a séance. Really, y' know, I'm beginning to suspect that some medium was hovering in the vicinage last night doing some rather tip-top materialisations. . . . I say, Markham, could you get an indictment against ectoplasmic emanation?"

"It wasn't no spook that made those finger-prints," growled Heath, with surly truculence.

Markham halted his nervous pacing and regarded Vance irritably

"Damn it ! This is rank nonsense. The man got in some way, and he got out, too. There's something wrong somewhere. Either the maid is mistaken about someone being here when she left, or else one of those phone operators went to sleep and won't admit it "

"Or else one of em's lying," supplemented Heath

Vance shook his head. "The dusky *fille de chambre*, I'd say, is eminently trustworthy. And if there was any doubt about any one's having come in the front door unnoticed, the lads on the switchboard would, in the present circumstances, be only too eager to admit it. . No, Markham, you'll simply have to approach this affair from the astral plane, so to speak "

Markham grunted his distaste of Vance's jocularitv

"That line of investigation I leave to you with your metaphysical theories and esoteric hypotheses "

"But, consider," protested Vance banteringly "You've proved conclusively—or, rather, you've demonstrated legally—that no one could have entered or departed from this apartment last night, and, as you've often told me, a court of law must decide all matters, not in accord with known or suspected facts, but according to the evidence, and the evidence in this case would prove a sound alibi for every corporeal being extant. And yet, it's not exactly tenable, d' ye see, that the lady strangled herself. If only it had been poison, what an exquisite and satisfyin' suicide case you'd have ! . . . Most inconsiderate of her homicidal visitor not to have used arsenic instead of his hands ! "

"Well, he strangled her," pronounced Heath "Furthermore, I'll lay my money on the fellow who called here last night at half past nine and couldn't get in. He's the bird I want to talk to "

"Indeed?" Vance produced another cigarette. "I shouldn't say, to judge from our description of him, that his conversation would prove particularly fascinating."

An ugly light came into Heath's eyes.

"We've got ways," he said through his teeth, "of getting damn interesting conversation out of people who haven't no great reputation for repartee."

Vance sighed. "How the Four Hundred needs you, my Sergeant!"

Markham looked at his watch.

"I've got pressing work at the office," he said, "and all this talk isn't getting us anywhere." He put his hand on Heath's shoulder. "I leave you to go ahead. This afternoon I'll have these people brought down to my office for another questioning—maybe I can jog their memories a bit. . . . You've got some line of investigation planned?"

"The usual routine," replied Heath drearily. "I'll go through Odell's papers, and I'll have three or four of my men check up on her."

"You'd better get after the Yellow Taxicab Company right away," Markham suggested. "Find out, if you can, who the man was who left here at half-past eleven last night, and where he went."

"Do you imagine for one moment," asked Vance, "that if this man knew anything about the murder, he would have stopped in the hall and asked the operator to call a taxi for him?"

"Oh, I don't look for much in that direction." Markham's tone was almost listless. "But the girl may have said something to him that'll give us a lead."

Vance shook his head facetiously. "O welcome pure-ey'd Faith, white-handed Hope, thou hovering angel, girt with golden wings!"

Markham was in no mood for chaffing. He turned to Heath, and spoke with forced cheeriness.

"Call me up later this afternoon. I may get some new

evidence out of the outfit we've just interviewed. And," he added, "be sure to put a man on guard here. I want this apartment kept just as it is until we see a little more light."

"I'll attend to that," Heath assured him.

Markham and Vance and I went out and entered the car. A few minutes later we were winding rapidly across town through Central Park.

"Recall our recent *conversazione* about footprints in the snow?" asked Vance, as we emerged into Fifth Avenue and headed south.

Markham nodded abstractedly.

"As I remember," mused Vance, "in the hypothetical case you presented there were not only footprints but a dozen or more witnesses—including a youthful prodigy—who saw a figure of some kind cross the hibernal landscape.

. . . *Gau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie!* Here you are in a most beastly pother because of the disheartening fact that there are neither footprints in the snow nor witnesses who saw a fleeing figure. In short, you are bereft of both direct and circumstantial evidence. . . . Sad, sad."

He wagged his head delectfully.

"You know, Markham, it appears to me that the testimony in this case constitutes conclusive legal proof that no one could have been with the deceased at the hour of her passing, and that, *ergo*, she is presumably alive. The strangled body of the lady is, I take it, simply an irrelevant circumstance from the standpoint of legal procedure. I know that you learned lawyers won't admit a murder without a body; but how, in sweet Heaven's name, do you get around a *corpus delicti* without a murder?"

"You're talking nonsense," Markham rebuked him, with a show of anger.

"Oh, quite," agreed Vance. "And yet, it's a distressing thing for a lawyer not to have footprints of some kind, isn't it, old dear? It leaves one so up in the air."

Suddenly Markham swung round. "You, of course, don't

need footprints, or any other kind of material clues," he flung at Vance tauntingly. "*You* have powers of divination such as are denied ordinary mortals. If I remember correctly, you informed me, somewhat grandiloquently, that, knowing the nature and conditions of a crime, you could lead me infallibly to the culprit, whether he left footprints or not. You recall that boast? . . . Well, here's a crime, and the perpetrator left no footprints coming or going. Be so good as to end my suspense by confiding in me who killed the Odell girl."

Vance's serenity was not ruffled by Markham's ill-humoured challenge. He sat smoking lazily for several minutes; then he leaned over and flicked his cigarette ash out of the window.

"'Pon my word, Markham," he rejoined evenly, "I'm half inclined to look into this silly murder. I think I'll wait, though, and see whom the nonplussed Heath turns up with his inquiries."

Markham grunted scoffingly, and sank back on the cushions.

"Your generosity wrings me," he said.

Chapter IX

THE PACK IN FULL CRY

(Tuesday, September 11th afternoon)

ON our way down town that morning we were delayed for a considerable time in the traffic congestion just north of Madison Square, and Markham anxiously looked at his watch

"It's past noon," he said. "I think I'll stop at the club and have a bite of lunch. . . . I presume that eating at this early hour would be too plebeian for so exquisite a hothouse flower as you."

Vance considered the invitation

"Since you deprived me of my breakfast," he decided, "I'll permit you to buy me some eggs *Benedictine*."

A few minutes later we entered the almost empty grill of the Stuyvesant Club, and took a table near one of the windows looking southward over the tree tops of Madison Square.

Shortly after we had given our order a uniformed attendant entered and, bowing deferentially at the District Attorney's elbow, held out an unaddressed communication sealed in one of the club's envelopes. Markham read it with an expression of growing curiosity, and as he studied the signature a look of mild surprise came into his eyes. At length he looked up and nodded to the waiting attendant. Then, excusing himself, he left us abruptly. It was fully twenty minutes before he returned

"Funny thing," he said "That note was from the man

who took the Odell woman to dinner and the theatre last night. . . . A small world," he mused. "He's staying here at the club—he's a non-resident member and makes it his headquarters when he's in town."

"You know him?" Vance put the question disinterestedly.

"I've met him several times—chap named Spotswoode." Markham seemed perplexed. "He's a man of family, lives in a country house on Long Island, and is regarded generally as a highly respectable member of society—one of the last persons I'd suspect of being mixed up with the Odell girl. But, according to his own confession, he played around a good deal with her during his visits to New York—'sowing a few belated wild oats,' as he expressed it—and last night took her to Francelle's for dinner and to the Winter Garden afterwards."

"Not my idea of an intellectual, or even edifyin', evenin'," commented Vance. "And he selected a deuced unlucky day for it. . . . I say, imagine opening the morning paper and learning that your *petite dame* of the preceding evening had been strangled! Disconcertin', what?"

"He's certainly disconcerted," said Markham. "The early afternoon papers were out about an hour ago, and he'd been phoning my office every ten minutes, when I suddenly walked in here. He's afraid his connection with the girl will leak out and disgrace him."

"And won't it?"

"I hardly see the necessity. No one knows who her escort was last evening; and since he obviously had nothing to do with the crime, what's to be gained by dragging him into it? He told me the whole story, and offered to stay in the city as long as I wanted him to."

"I infer, from the cloud of disappointment that enveloped you when you returned just now, that his story held nothing hopeful for you in the way of clues."

"No," Markham admitted. "The girl apparently never

spoke to him of her intimate affairs; and he couldn't give me a single helpful suggestion. His account of what happened last night agreed perfectly with Jessup's. He called for the girl at seven, brought her home at about eleven, stayed with her half an hour or so, and then left her. When he heard her call for help he was frightened, but on being assured by her there was nothing wrong, he concluded she had dozed off into a nightmare, and thought no more of it. He drove direct to the club here, arriving about ten minutes to twelve. Judge Redfern, who saw him descend from the taxi, insisted on his coming upstairs and playing poker with some men who were waiting in the Judge's rooms for him. They played until three o'clock this morning."

"Your Long Island Don Juan has certainly not supplied you with any footprints in the snow."

"Anyway, his coming forward at this time closes one line of inquiry over which we might have wasted considerable time."

"If many more lines of inquiry are closed," remarked Vance dryly, "you'll be in a distressin' dilemma, don't y' know?"

"There are enough still open to keep me busy," said Markham, pushing back his plate and calling for the check. He rose; then pausing, regarded Vance meditatively. "Are you sufficiently interested to want to come along?"

"Eh, what? My word! . . . Charmed, I'm sure. But, I say, sit down just a moment—there's a good fellow!—till I finish my coffee."

I was considerably astonished at Vance's ready acceptance, careless and bantering though it was, for there was an exhibition of old Chinese prints at the Montross Galleries that afternoon, which he had planned to attend. A Riokai and a Moyeki, said to be very fine examples of Suno painting, were to be shown; and Vance was particularly eager to acquire them for his collection.

We rode with Markham to the Criminal Courts building

and, entering by the Franklin Street door, took the private elevator to the District Attorney's spacious but dingy private office which overlooked the grey-stone ramparts of the Tombs. Vance seated himself in one of the heavy leather-upholstered chairs near the carved oak table on the right of the desk, and lighted a cigarette with an air of cynical amusement.

"I await with anticipat'ry delight the grinding of the wheels of justice," he confided, leaning back lazily.

"You are doomed not to hear the first turn of those wheels," retorted Markham "The initial revolution will take place outside of this office." And he disappeared through a swinging door which led to the judge's chambers.

Five minutes later he returned, and sat down in the high-backed swivel chair at his desk, with his back to the four tall narrow windows in the south wall of the office.

"I just saw Judge Redfern," he explained—"it happened to be the midday recess—and he verified Spotswoode's statement in regard to the poker game. The Judge met him outside of the club at ten minutes before midnight, and was with him until three in the morning. He noted the time because he had promised his guests to be back at half-past eleven, and was twenty minutes late."

"Why all this substantiation of an obviously unimportant fact?" asked Vance.

"A matter of routine," Markham told him, slightly impatient. "In a case of this kind every factor, however seemingly remote to the main issue, must be checked."

"Really, y' know, Markham"—Vance laid his head back on the chair and gazed dreamily at the ceiling—"one would think that this eternal routine, which you lawyer chaps worship so devoutly, actually got one somewhere occasionally; whereas it never gets one anywhere. Remember the Red Queen in 'Through the Looking-Glass——'"

"I'm too busy at present to debate the question of

routine *versus* inspiration," Markham answered brusquely, pressing a button beneath the edge of his desk.

Swacker, his youthful and energetic secretary, appeared at the door which communicated with a narrow inner chamber between the District Attorney's office and the main waiting-room.

"Yes, Chief?" The secretary's eyes gleamed expectantly behind his enormous horn-rimmed glasses.

"Tell Ben to send me in a man at once"¹

Swacker went out through the corridor door, and a minute or two later a suave, rotund man, dressed immaculately and wearing a *pince-nez*, entered, and stood before Markham with an ingratiating smile.

"Morning, Tracey" Markham's tone was pleasant but curt. "Here's a list of four witnesses in connection with the Odell case that I want brought down here at once—the two phone operators, the maid, and the janitor. You'll find them at 184 West 71st Street: Sergeant Heath is holding them there."

"Right, sir." Tracey took the memorandum, and with a priggish, but by no means inelegant, bow went out.

During the next hour Markham plunged into the general work that had accumulated during the forenoon, and I was amazed at the man's tremendous vitality and efficiency. He disposed of as many important matters as would have occupied the ordinary business man for an entire day. Swacker bobbed in and out with electric energy, and various clerks appeared at the touch of a buzzer, took their orders, and were gone with breathless rapidity. Vance, who had sought diversion in a tome of famous arson trials, looked up admiringly from time to time, and shook his head in mild reproach at such spirited activity.

It was just half-past two when Swacker announced the return of Tracey with the four witnesses; and for two hours

¹"Ben" was Colonel Benjamin Hanlon, the commanding officer of the Detective Division attached to the District Attorney's office.

Markham questioned and cross-questioned them with a thoroughness and an insight that even I, as a lawyer, had rarely seen equalled. His interrogation of the two phone operators was quite different from his casual questioning of them earlier in the day; and if there had been a single relevant omission in their former testimony, it would certainly have been caught now by Markham's gruelling catechism. But when, at last, they were told they could go, no new information had been brought to light. Their stories now stood firmly grounded: no one—with the exception of the girl herself and her escort, and the disappointed visitor at half-past nine—had entered the front door and passed down the hall to the Odell apartment from seven o'clock on; and no one had passed out that way. The janitor reiterated stubbornly that he had bolted the side door a little after six, and no amount of wheedling or aggression could shake his dogged certainty on that point. Amy Gibson, the maid, could add nothing to her former testimony. Markham's intensive examination of her produced only repetitions of what she had already told him.

Not one new possibility—not one new suggestion—was brought out. In fact, the two hours' interlocutory proceedings resulted only in closing up every loophole in a seemingly incredible situation. When, at half-past four, Markham sat back in his chair with a weary sigh, the chance of unearthing a promising means of approach to the astonishing problem seemed more remote than ever.

Vance closed his treaties on arson, and threw away his cigarette.

"I tell you, Markham, old chap," he grinned, "this case requires umbilicular contemplation, not routine. Why not call in an Egyptian seeress with a *flair* for crystal-gazing?"

"If this sort of thing goes on much longer," returned Markham dispiritedly, "I'll be tempted to take your advice."

Just then Swacker looked in through the door to say that

Inspector Brenner was on the wire. Markham picked up the telephone receiver, and as he listened he jotted down some notes on a pad. When the call had ended, he turned to Vance.

"You seem disturbed over the condition of the steel jewel-case we found in the bedroom. Well, the expert on burglar tools just called up; and he verifies his opinion of this morning. The case was pried open with a specially made cold chisel such as only a professional burglar would carry or would know how to use. It had an inch-and-three-eighths bevelled bit and a one-inch flat handle. It was an old instrument—there was a peculiar nick in the blade—and is the same one that was used in a successful house-break on upper Park Avenue early last summer. . . . Does that highly exciting information ameliorate your anxiety?"

"Can't say that it does" Vance had again become serious and perplexed. "In fact, it makes the situation still more fantastic. . . . I could see a glimmer of light—erie and unearthly, perhaps, but still a perceptible illumination—in all this murkiness if it wasn't for that jewel-case and the steel chisel.

Markham was about to answer when Swacker again looked in and informed him that Sergeant Heath had arrived and wanted to see him.

Heath's manner was far less depressed than when we had taken leave of him that morning. He accepted the cigar Markham offered him, and seating himself at the conference table in front of the District Attorney's desk, drew out a battered note-book.

"We've had a little good luck," he began. "Burke and Emery—two of the men I put on the case—got a line on Odell at the first place they made inquiries. From what they learned, she didn't run around with many men—limited herself to a few live wires, and played the game with what you'd call *finesse*. . . . The principal one—the

man who's been seen most with her—is Charles Cleaver.”

Markham sat up.

“I know Cleaver—if it's the same one.”

“It's him, all right,” declared Heath. “Former Brooklyn Tax Commissioner; been interested in a pool-room for pony-betting over in Jersey City ever since. Hangs out at the Stuyvesant Club, where he can hobnob with his old Tammany Hall cronies.”

“That's the one,” nodded Markham. “He's a kind of professional gay-dog—known as Pop, I believe.”

Vance gazed into space.

“Well, well,” he murmured. “So old Pop Cleaver was also entangled with our subtle and sanguine Dolores. She certainly couldn't have loved him for his *beaux yeux*.”

“I thought, sir,” went on Heath, “that, seeing as how Cleaver is always in and out of the Stuyvesant Club, you might ask him some questions about Odell. He ought to know something.”

“Glad to, Sergeant,” Markham made a note on his pad. “I'll try to get in touch with him to-night. . . . Anyone else on your list?”

“There's a fellow named Mannix—Louis Mannix—who met Odell when she was in the ‘Follies’ but she chucked him over a year ago, and they haven't been seen together since. He's got another girl now. He's the head of the firm of Mannix and Levine, fur importers, and is one of your night-club rounders—a heavy spender. But I don't see much use of barking up that tree—his affair with Odell went cold too long ago.”

“Yes,” agreed Markham; “I think we can eliminate him.”

“I say, if you keep up this elimination much longer,” observed Vance, “you won't have anything left but the lady's corpse.”

“And then, there's the man who took her out last night,” pursued Heath. “Nobody seems to know his name—he

must've been one of those discreet, careful old boys. I thought at first he might have been Cleaver, but the descriptions don't tally. . . . And by the way, sir, here's a funny thing: when he left Odell last night he took the taxi down to the Stuyvesant Club, and got out there."

Markham nodded. "I know all about that, Sergeant. And I know who the man was; and it wasn't Cleaver."

Vance was chuckling.

"The Stuyvesant Club seems to be well in the forefront of this case," he said. "I do hope it doesn't suffer the sad fate of the Knickerbocker Athletic."¹

Heath was intent on the main issue.

"Who was the man, Mr. Markham?"

Markham hesitated, as if pondering the advisability of taking the other into his confidence. Then he said: "I'll tell you his name, but in strict confidence. The man was Kenneth Spotswoode."

He then recounted the story of his being called away from lunch, and of his failure to elicit any helpful suggestions from Spotswoode. He also informed Heath of his verification of the man's statements regarding his movements after meeting Judge Redfern at the club.

"And," added Markham, "since he obviously left the girl before she was murdered, there's no necessity to bother him. In fact, I gave him my word I'd keep him out of it for his family's sake."

"If you're satisfied, sir, I am." Heath closed his notebook and put it away. "There's just one other little thing. Odell used to live on 110th Street, and Emery dug up her former landlady and learned that this fancy guy the maid told us about used to call on her regularly."

¹ Vance was here referring to the famous Molineaux case, which, in 1898, sounded the death-knell of the old Knickerbocker Athletic Club at Madison Avenue and 45th Street. But it was commercialism that ended the Stuyvesant's career. This club, which stood on the north side of Madison Square, was razed a few years later to make room for a skyscraper.

"That reminds me, Sergeant." Markham picked up the memorandum he had made during Inspector Brenner's phone call. "Here's some data the Professor gave me about the forcing of the jewel-case."

Heath studied the paper with considerable eagerness. "Just as I thought!" He nodded his head with satisfaction. "Clear-cut professional job, by somebody who's been in the line of work before."

Vance roused himself.

"Still, if such is the case," he said, "why did this experienced burglar first use the insufficient poker? And why did he overlook the living-room clothes-press?"

"I'll find all that out, Mr. Vance, when I get my hands on him," asserted Heath, with a hard look in his eyes. "And the guy I want to have a nice quiet little chat with is the one with the pleated silk shirt and the chamois gloves."

"*Chacun à son goût*," sighed Vance. "For myself I have no yearning whatever to hold converse with him. Somehow, I can't just picture a professional looter trying to rend a steel box with a cast-iron poker."

"Forget the poker," Heath advised gruffly. "He jim-mied the box with a steel chisel; and that same chisel was used last summer in another burglary on Park Avenue. What about *that*?"

"Ah! That's what torments me, Sergeant. If it wasn't for that disturbin' fact, d' ye see, I'd be lightsome and *ans souci* this afternoon, inviting my soul over a dish of tea at Claremont."

Detective Bellamy was announced, and Heath sprang to his feet.

"That'll mean news about those finger-prints," he prophesied hopefully.

Bellamy entered unemotionally, and walked up to the District Attorney's desk.

"Cap'n Dubois sent me over," he said. "He thought you'd want the report on those Odell prints." He reached

into his pocket and drew out a small flat folder which, at a sign from Markham, he handed to Heath. "We identified 'em. Both made by the same hand, like Cap'n Dubois said, and that hand belonged to Tony Skeel."

"'Dude' Skeel, eh?" The Sergeant's tone was vibrant with suppressed excitement. "Say, Mr. Markham, that gets us somewhere. Skeel's an ex-convict and an artist in his line."

He opened the folder and took out an oblong card and a sheet of blue paper containing eight or ten lines of type-writing. He studied the card, gave a satisfied grunt, and handed it to Markham. Vance and I stepped up and looked at it. At the top was the familiar rogues'-gallery photograph showing the full face and profile of a regular featured youth with thick hair and a square chin. His eyes were wide-set and pale, and he wore a small, evenly trimmed moustache with waxed, needle-point ends. Below the double photograph was a brief tabulated description of its sitter, giving his name, aliases, residence, and Bertillon measurements, and designating the character of his illegal profession. Underneath were ten little squares arranged in two rows, each containing a finger-print impression made in black ink -- the upper row being the impressions of the right hand, the lower row those of the left.

"So that's the *arbitrator elegantium* who introduced the silk shirt for full dress wear! My word!" Vance regarded the identification card satirically. "I wish he'd start a craze for gaiters with dinner jackets. These New York theatres are frightfully draughty in winter."

Heath put the card back in the folder, and glanced over the typewritten paper that had accompanied it.

"He's our man, and no mistake, Mr. Markham. Listen to this: 'Tony (Dude) Skeel. Two years Elmira Reformatory, 1902 to 1904. One year in the Baltimore County Jail for petty larceny, 1906. Three years in San Quentin for assault and robbery, 1908 to 1911. Arrested Chicago for

house-breaking, 1912; case dismissed. Arrested and tried for burglary in Albany, 1913; no conviction. Served two years and eight months in Sing Sing for house-breaking and burglary, 1914 to 1916." He folded the paper and put it, with the card, into his breast-pocket. "Sweet little record."

"That dope what you wanted?" asked the imperturbable Bellamy.

"I'll say!" Heath was almost jovial.

Bellamy lingered expectantly with one eye on the District Attorney; and Markham, as if suddenly remembering something, took out a box of cigars and held it out.

"Much obliged, sir," said Bellamy, helping himself to two *Mi Favoritas*; and putting them into his waistcoat pocket with great care, he went out.

"I'll use your phone now, if you don't mind, Mr. Markham," said Heath.

He called the Homicide Bureau.

"Look up Tony Skeel - Dude Skeel - *pronto*, and bring him in as soon as you find him," were his orders to Snitkin. "Get his address from the files, and take Burke and Emery with you. If he's hopped it, send out a general alarm and have him picked up—some of the boys'll have a line on him. Lock him up without booking him, see? . . . And, listen. Search his room for burglar tools—he probably won't have any laying around, but I specially want a one-and-three-eighths-inch chisel with a nick in the blade. I'll be at Headquarters in half an hour."

He hung up the receiver and rubbed his hands together.

"Now we're sailing," he rejoiced.

Vance had gone to the window, and stood staring down on the "Bridge of Sighs," his hands thrust deep into his pockets. Slowly he turned, and fixed Heath with a contemplative eye.

"It simply won't do, don't y' know" he asserted.

"Your friend, the Dude, may have ripped open that bally

box, but his head isn't the right shape for the rest of last evening's performance "

Heath was contemptuous

"Not being a phrenologist, I'm going by the shape of his finger-prints "

"A woeful error in the technique of criminal approach, *sergente mio*," replied Vance dulcetly "The question of culpability in this case isn't so simple as you imagine It's deuced complicated And this glass of fashion and mould of form whose portrait you're carryin' next to your heart has merely added to its intricacy."

Chapter X

A FORCED INTERVIEW

(Tuesday, September 11th; 8 p.m.)

MARKHAM dined at the Stuyvesant Club, as was his custom, and at his invitation Vance and I remained with him. He no doubt figured that our presence at the dinner-table would act as a bulwark against the intrusion of casual acquaintances; for he was in no mood for the pleasantries of the curious. Rain had begun to fall late in the afternoon, and when dinner was over it had turned into a steady down-pour which threatened to last well into the night. Dinner over, the three of us sought a secluded corner of the lounge-room, and settled ourselves for a protracted smoke.

We had been there less than a quarter of an hour when a slightly rotund man, with a heavy, florid face and thin grey hair, strolled up to us with a stealthy, self-assured gait, and wished Markham a jovial good evening. Though I had not met the new comer I knew him to be Charles Cleaver.

"Got your note at the desk saying you wanted to see me." He spoke with a voice curiously gentle for a man of his size; but, for all its gentleness, there was in it a timbre of calculation and coldness.

Markham rose and, after shaking hands, introduced him to Vance and me—though, it seemed, Vance had known him slightly for some time. He took the chair Markham indicated, and, producing a *Corona Corona*, he carefully cut the end with a gold clipper attached to his heavy watch-

chain, rolled the cigar between his lips to dampen it, and lighted it in closely cupped hands.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, Mr. Cleaver," began Markham, "but, as you probably have read, a young woman by the name of Margaret Odell was murdered last night in her apartments in 71st Street. . . ."

He paused. He seemed to be considering just how he could best broach a subject so obviously delicate; and perhaps he hoped that Cleaver would volunteer the fact of his acquaintance with the girl. But not a muscle of the man's face moved; and, after a moment, Markham continued.

"In making inquiries into the young woman's life I learned that you, among others, were fairly well acquainted with her."

Again he paused. Cleaver lifted his eyebrows almost imperceptibly, but said nothing.

"The fact is," went on Markham, a trifle annoyed by the other's deliberately circumspect attitude, "my report states that you were seen with her on many occasions during a period of nearly two years. Indeed, the only inference to be drawn from what I've learned is that you were more than casually interested in Miss Odell."

"Yes?" The query was as non-committal as it was gentle.

"Yes," repeated Markham. "And I may add, Mr. Cleaver, that this is not the time for pretences or suppressions. I am talking to you to-night, in large measure *ex officio*, because it occurred to me that you could give me some assistance in clearing the matter up. I think it only fair to say that a certain man is now under grave suspicion, and we hope to arrest him very soon. But, in any event, we will need help, and that is why I requested this little chat with you at the club."

"And how can I assist you?" Cleaver's face remained blank; only his lips moved as he put the question.

"Knowing this young woman as well as you did," explained Markham patiently, "you are no doubt in possession of some information—certain facts or confidences, let us say—which would throw light on her brutal, and apparently unexpected, murder."

Cleaver was silent for some time. His eyes had shifted to the wall before him, but otherwise his features remained set.

"I'm afraid I can't accommodate you," he said at length.

"Your attitude is not quite what might be expected in one whose conscience is entirely clear," returned Markham, with a show of resentment.

The man turned a mildly inquisitive gaze upon the District Attorney.

"What has my knowing the girl to do with her being murdered? She didn't confide in me who her murderer was to be. She didn't even tell me that she knew anyone who intended to strangle her. If she'd known she most likely could have avoided being murdered."

Vance was sitting close to me, a little removed from the others, and, leaning over, murmured in my ear *sotto voce*:

"Markham's up against another lawyer—poor dear! . . . A crumplin' situation."

But however inauspiciously this interlocutory skirmish may have begun, it soon developed into a grim combat which ended in Cleaver's complete surrender. Markham, despite his suavity and graciousness, was an unrelenting and resourceful antagonist; and it was not long before he had forced from Cleaver some highly significant information.

In response to the man's ironically evasive rejoinder, he turned quickly and leaned forward.

"You're not on the witness-stand in your own defence, Mr. Cleaver," he said sharply, "however much you appear to regard yourself as eligible for that position."

Cleaver glared back fixedly without replying; and

Markham, his eyelids level, studied the man opposite, determined to decipher all he could from the other's phlegmatic countenance. But Cleaver was apparently just as determined that his *vis-à-vis* should decipher absolutely nothing; and the features that met Markham's scrutiny were as arid as a desert. At length Markham sank back in his chair.

"It doesn't matter particularly," he remarked indifferently, "whether you discuss the matter or not here in the club to-night. If you prefer to be brought to my office in the morning by a sheriff with a subpoena, I'll be only too glad to accommodate you."

"That's up to you," Cleaver told him hostilely.

"And what's printed in the newspapers about it will be up to the reporters," rejoined Markham. "I'll explain the situation to them and give them a verbatim report of the interview."

"But I've nothing to tell you." The other's tone was suddenly conciliatory; the idea of publicity was evidently highly distasteful to him.

"So you informed me before," said Markham coldly. "Therefore I wish you good evening."

He turned to Vance and me with the air of a man who had terminated an unpleasant episode.

Cleaver, however, made no move to go. He smoked thoughtfully for a minute or two; then he gave a short, hard laugh which did not even disturb the contours of his face.

"Oh, hell!" he grumbled, with forced good nature. "As you said, I'm not on the witness-stand. . . . What do you want to know?"

"I've told you the situation." Markham's voice betrayed a curious irritation. "You know the sort of thing I want. How did this Odell girl live? Who were her intimates? Who would have been likely to want her out of the way? What enemies had she?—Anything that might lead us to

an explanation of her death. . . . And incidentally," he added, with tartness, "anything that'll eliminate yourself from any suspected participation, direct or indirect, in the affair."

Cleaver stiffened at these last words, and started to protest indignantly. But immediately he changed his tactics. Smiling contemptuously, he took out a leather pocket-case and, extracting a small folded paper, handed it to Markham.

"I can eliminate myself easily enough," he proclaimed, with easy confidence. "There's a speeding summons from Boonton, New Jersey. Note the date and the time: September the 10th—last night—at half-past eleven. Was driving down to Hopatcong, and was ticketed by a motorcycle cop just as I had passed Boonton and was heading for Mountain Lakes. Got to appear there in court to-morrow morning. Damn nuisance, these country constables." He gave Markham a long, calculating look. "You couldn't square it for me, could you? It's a rotten ride to Jersey, and I've got a lot to do to-morrow."

Markham, who had inspected the summons casually, put it in his pocket.

"I'll attend to it for you," he promised, smiling amiably. "Now tell me what you know."

Cleaver puffed meditatively on his cigar. Then, leaning back and crossing his knees, he spoke with apparent candour.

"I doubt if I know much that'll help you. . . . I liked the Canary, as she was called—in fact, was pretty much attached to her at one time. Did a number of foolish things, wrote her a lot of damn-fool letters when I went to Cuba last year. Even had my picture taken with her down at Atlantic City." He made a self-condemnatory grimace. "Then she began to get cool and distant; broke several appointments with me. I raised the devil with her, but the only answer I got was a demand for money. . . ."

He stopped and looked down at his cigar ash. A venomous hatred gleamed from his narrowed eyes, and the muscles of his jowls hardened.

"No use lying about it. She had those letters and things, and she touched me for a neat little sum before I got 'em back. . . ."

"When was this?"

There was a momentary hesitation. "Last June," Cleaver replied. Then he hurried on: "Mr. Markham"—his voice was bitter—"I don't want to throw mud on a dead person; but that woman was the shrewdest, coldest-blooded blackmailer it's ever been my misfortune to meet. And I'll say this, too: I wasn't the only easy mark she squeezed. She had others on her string. I happen to know she once dug into old Louis Mannix for a plenty—he told me about it."

"Could you give me the names of any of these other men?" asked Markham, attempting to dissemble his eagerness. "I've already heard of the Mannix episode."

"No, I couldn't," Cleaver spoke regretfully. "I've seen the Canary here and there with different men; and there's one in particular I've noticed lately. But they were all strangers to me."

"I suppose the Mannix affair is dead and buried by this time?"

"Yes, ancient history. You won't get any line on the situation from that angle. But there are others more recent than Mannix—who might bear looking into, if you could find them. I'm easy going myself; take things as they come. But there's a lot of men who'd go red headed if she did the things to them that she did to me."

Cleaver, despite his confession, did not strike me as easy-going, but rather as a cold, self-contained, nerveless person whose immobility was at all times dictated by policy and expediency.

Markham studied him closely.

"You think, then, her death may have been due to vengeance on the part of some disillusioned admirer?"

Cleaver carefully considered his answer.

"Seems reasonable," he said finally. "She was riding for a fall."

There was a short silence; then Markham asked:

"Do you happen to know of a young man she was interested in—good-looking, small, blond moustache, light blue eyes—named Skeel?"

Cleaver snorted derisively.

"That wasn't the Canary's specialty—she let the young ones alone, as far as I know."

At this moment a page-boy approached Cleaver, and bowed.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir, but there's a phone call for your brother. Party said it was important and, as your brother isn't in the club now, the operator thought you might know where he'd gone."

"How would I know?" fumed Cleaver. "Don't ever bother me with his calls."

"Your brother in the city?" asked Markham casually. "I met him years ago. He's a San Franciscan, isn't he?"

"Yes—rabid Californian. He's visiting New York for a couple of weeks so he'll appreciate Frisco more when he gets back."

It seemed to me that this information was given reluctantly; and I got the impression that Cleaver, for some reason, was annoyed. But Markham, apparently, was too absorbed in the problem before him to take notice of the other's disgruntled air, for he reverted at once to the subject of the murder.

"I happen to know one man who has been interested in the Odell woman recently; he may be the same one you've seen her with—tall, about forty-five, and wears a gray, close-cropped moustache." (He was, I knew, describing Spotswoode.)

"That's the man," averred Cleaver. "Saw them together only last week at Mouquin's."

Markham was disappointed.

"Unfortunately, he's checked off the list. . . . But there must be somebody who was in the girl's confidence. You're sure you couldn't cudgel your brains to any advantage?"

Cleaver appeared to think.

"If it's merely a question of some one who had her confidence," he said, "I might suggest Doctor Lindquist—first name's Ambrose, I think; and he lives somewhere in the Forties near Lexington Avenue. But I don't know that he'd be of any value to you. Still, he was pretty close to her at one time."

"You mean that this Doctor Lindquist might have been interested in her otherwise than professionally?"

"I wouldn't like to say." Cleaver smoked for a while as if inwardly debating the situation. "Anyway, here are the facts: Lindquist is one of those exclusive society specialists—a neurologist he calls himself—and I believe he's the head of a private sanatorium of some kind for nervous women. He must have money, and, of course, his social standing is a vital asset to him—just the sort of man the Canary might have selected as a source of income. And I know this: he came to see her a good deal oftener than a doctor of his type would be apt to. I ran into him one night at her apartment, and when she introduced us he wasn't even civil."

"It will at least bear looking into," replied Markham unenthusiastically. "You've no one else in mind who might know something helpful?"

Cleaver shook his head.

"No—no one."

"And she never mentioned anything to you that indicated she was in fear of any one, or anticipated trouble?"

"Not a word. Fact is, I was bowled over by the news. I never read any paper but the morning *Herald*—except of course, *The Daily Racing Form* at night. And as there was

no account of the murder in this morning's paper, I didn't hear about it until just before dinner. The boys in the billiard-room were talking about it, and I went out and looked at an afternoon paper. If it hadn't been for that, I might not have known of it till to-morrow morning."

Markham discussed the case with him until half-past eight, but could elicit no further suggestions. Finally Cleaver rose to go.

"Sorry I couldn't give you more help," he said. His rubicund face was beaming now, and he shook hands with Markham in the friendliest fashion.

"You wangled that viscid old sport rather cleverly, don't y' know," remarked Vance, when Cleaver had gone. "But there's something deuced queer about him. The transition from his gambler's glassy stare to his garrulous confidences was too sudden—suspiciously sudden, in fact. I may be evil-minded, but he didn't impress me as a luminous pillar of truth. Maybe it's because I don't like those cold, boiled eyes of his—somehow they didn't harmonise with his gushing imitation of open-hearted frankness."

"We can allow him something for his embarrassing position," suggested Markham charitably. "It isn't exactly pleasant to admit having been taken in and blackmailed by a charmer."

"Still, if he got his letters back in June, why did he continue paying court to the lady? Heath reported he was active in that sector right up to the end."

"He may be the complete amorist," smiled Markham.

"Some like Abra, what?—"

'Abra was ready ere I call'd her name.

And, though I call'd another, Abra came.'

Maybe—yes. He might qualify as a modern Cayley Drumhale."

"At any rate, he gave us, in Doctor Lindquist, a possible source of information."

"Quite so," agreed Vance. "And that's about the only point of his whole passionate unfoldment that I particularly put any stock in, because it was the only point he indicated with any decent reticence. . . . My advice is that you interview this Æsculapius of the fair sex without further delay."

"I'm dog-tired," objected Markham. "Let it wait till to-morrow."

Vance glanced at the great clock over the stone mantel.

"It's latish, I'll admit, but why not, as Pitticus advised, seize time by the forelock?"

'Who lets slip fortune, her shall never find
Occasion once past by, is bold behind'

But the elder Cato anticipated Cowley. In his '*Disticha de Moribus*' he wrote: *Ironce capulata*—"

"Come!" pleaded Markham rising. "Anything to damper this flow of erudition."

Chapter XI

SEEKING INFORMATION

(Tuesday, September 11th ; 9 p m)

TEN minutes later we were ringing the bell of a stately old brownstone house in East 44th Street.

A resplendently caparisoned butler opened the door, and Markham presented his card.

"Take this to the doctor at once, and say that it's urgent.

"The doctor is just finishing dinner," the stately seneschal informed him ; and conducted us into a richly furnished reception-room, with deep comfortable chairs, silken draperies, and subdued lights.

"A typical gynecologist's seraglio," observed Vance, looking around "I'm sure the pasha himself is a majestic and elegant person. *ye*."

The prediction proved true. Doctor Lindquist entered the room a moment later inspecting the District Attorney's card as if it had been a cuneiform inscription whose import he could not quite decipher. He was a tall man in his late forties, with bushy hair and eyebrows, and a complexion abnormally pale. His face was long, and, despite the asymmetry of his features, he might easily have been called handsome. He was in dinner clothes, and he carried himself with the self-conscious precision of a man unduly impressed with his own importance. He seated himself at a kidney-shaped desk of carved mahogany, and lifted his eyes with polite inquiry to Markham.

"To what am I indebted for the honour of this call ?"

he asked in a studiously melodious voice, lingering over each word caressingly. "You are most fortunate to have found me in," he added, before Markham could speak. "I confer with patients only by appointment." One felt that he experienced a certain humiliation at having received us without elaborate ceremonial preliminaries.

Markham, whose nature was opposed to all circumlocution and pretence, came direct to the point.

"This isn't a professional consultation, doctor; but it happens that I want to speak to you about one of your former patients—a Miss Margaret Odell."

Doctor Lindquist regarded the gold paper-weight before him with vacantly reminiscent eyes.

"Ah, yes. Miss Odell. I was just reading of her violent end. A most unfortunate and tragic affair. . . . In just what way can I be of service to you?—You understand, of course, that the relationship between a physician and his patient is one of sacred confidence——"

"I understand that thoroughly," Markham assured him abruptly. "On the other hand, it is the sacred duty of every citizen to assist the authorities in bringing a murderer to justice. And if there is anything you can tell me which will help toward that end, I shall certainly expect you to tell me."

The doctor raised his hand slightly in polite protestation.

"I shall, of course, do all I can to assist you, if you will but indicate your desires."

"There's no need to beat about the bush, doctor," said Markham. "I know that Miss Odell was a patient of yours for a long time; and I realise that it is highly possible, not to say probable, that she told you certain personal things which may have direct bearing on her death."

"But, my dear Mr.——" —Doctor Lindquist glanced ostentatiously at the card—"ah—Markham, my relations with Miss Odell were of a purely professional character."

"I had understood, however," ventured Markham, "that,

while what you say may be technically true, nevertheless there was an informality, let me say, in that relationship. Perhaps I may state it better by saying that your professional attitude transcended a merely scientific interest in her case."

I heard Vance chuckle softly; and I myself could hardly suppress a smile at Markham's verbose and orbicular accusation. But Doctor Lindquist, it seemed, was in no wise disconcerted. Assuming an air of beguiling pensiveness, he said:

"I will confess, in the interests of strict accuracy, that during my somewhat protracted treatment of her case, I came to regard the young woman with a certain—shall I say, fatherly liking? But I doubt if she was even aware of this mild sentiment on my part."

The corners of Vance's mouth twitched slightly. He was sitting with drowsy eyes, watching the doctor with a look of studious amusement.

"And she never at any time told you of any private or personal affairs that were causing her anxiety?" persisted Markham.

Doctor Lindquist pyramided his fingers, and appeared to give the question his undivided thought.

"No, I can't recall a single statement of that nature." His words were measured and urbane. "I know, naturally, in a general way, her manner of living; but the details, you will readily perceive, were wholly outside my province as a medical consultant. The disorganisation of her nerves was due—so my diagnoses led me to conclude—to late hours, excitement, irregular and rich eating—what, I believe, is referred to vulgarly as going the pace. The modern woman, in this febrile age, sir——"

"When did you see her last, may I ask?" Markham interrupted impatiently.

The doctor made a pantomime of eloquent surprise.

"When did I see her last? . . . Let me see." He could,

apparently, recall the occasion only with considerable difficulty. "A fortnight ago, perhaps—though it may have been longer. I really can't recall. . . . Shall I refer to my files?"

"That won't be necessary," said Markham. He paused, and regarded the doctor with a look of disarming affability. "And was this last visit a paternal or merely a professional one?"

"Professional, of course" Doctor Lindquist's eyes were impassive and only mildly interested; but his face, I felt, was by no means the unedited reflection of his thoughts.

"Did the meeting take place here or at her apartment?"

"I believe I called on her at her home."

"You called on her a great deal, doctor—so I am informed—and at rather unconventional hours. . . . Is this entirely in accord with your practice of seeing patients only by appointment?"

Markham's tone was pleasant, but from the nature of his question I knew that he was decidedly irritated by the man's bland hypocrisy, and felt that he was deliberately withholding relevant information.

Before Doctor Lindquist could reply, however, the butler appeared at the door, and silently indicated an extension telephone on a table beside the desk. With an unctuously murmured apology, the doctor turned and lifted the receiver.

Vance took advantage of this opportunity to scribble something on a piece of paper and pass it surreptitiously to Markham.

His call completed, Doctor Lindquist drew himself up haughtily, and faced Markham with chilling-scorn.

"Is it the function of the District Attorney," he asked distantly, "to harass respectable physicians with insulting questions? I did not know that it was illegal—or even original, for that matter—for a doctor to visit his patients."

"I am not discussing *now*"—Markham emphasised the adverb—"your infractions of the law; but since you sug-

gest a possibility which, I assure you, was not in my mind, would you be good enough to tell me—merely as a matter of form—where you were last night between eleven and twelve?”

The question produced a startling effect. Doctor Lindquist became suddenly like a tautly drawn rope, and, rising slowly and stiffly, he glared, with cold intense venom, at the District Attorney. His velvety mask had fallen off; and I detected another emotion beneath his repressed anger: his expression cloaked a fear, and his wrath but partly veiled a passionate uncertainty.

“My whereabouts last night is no concern of yours.” He spoke with great effort, his breath coming and going noisily.

Markham waited, apparently unmoved, his eyes riveted on the trembling man before him. This calm scrutiny completely broke down the other’s self-control.

“What do you mean by forcing yourself in here with your contemptible insinuations?” he shouted. His face, now livid and mottled, was hideously contorted; his hands made spasmodic movements; and his whole body shook as with a tremor. “Get out of here—you and your two myrmidons! Get out, before I have you thrown out!”

Markham, himself enraged now, was about to reply, when Vance took him by the arm.

“The doctor is gently hinting that we go,” he said. And with amazing swiftness he spun Markham round, and led him firmly out of the room.

When we were again in the taxicab on our way back to the club, Vance sniggered gaily.

“A sweet specimen, that! Paranoia. Or, more likely, manic-depressive insanity—the *folie circulaire* type: recurring periods of maniacal excitement alternating with periods of the clearest sanity, don’t y’ know. Anyway, the doctor’s disorder belongs in the category of psychoses—associated with the maturation or waning of the sexual instinct. He’s just the right age, too. Neurotic degenerate—that’s what

this oily Hippocrates is. In another minute he would have attacked you. . . . My word! It's a good thing I came to the rescue. Such chaps are about as safe as rattlesnakes."

He shook his head in a mock discouragement.

"Really, y' know, Markham, old thing," he added, "you should study the cranial indications of your fellow man more carefully—*vultus est index animi*. Did you, by any chance, note the gentleman's wide rectangular forehead, his irregular eyebrows, and pale luminous eyes, and his outstanding ears with their thin upper rims, their pointed tragi and split lobes? . . . A clever devil, this Ambroise—but a moral imbecile. Beware of those pseudo-pyriform faces, Markham; leave their Apollonian Greek suggestiveness to misunderstood women."

"I wonder what he really knows?" grumbled Markham irritably.

"Oh, he knows something,—rest assured of that! And if only we knew it, too, we'd be considerably further along in the investigation. Furthermore, the information he is hiding is somewhat unpleasantly connected with himself. His euphoria is a bit shaken. He frightfully overdid the grand manner; his valedict'ry fulmination was the true expression of his feeling toward us."

"Yes," agreed Markham. "That question about last night acted like a petard. What prompted you to suggest my asking it?"

"A number of things—his gratuitous and obviously mendacious statement that he had just read of the murder; his wholly insincere homily on the sacredness of professional confidences; the cautious and Pecksniffian confession of his fatherly regard for the girl; his elaborate struggle to remember when he had last seen her—this particularly, I think, made me suspicious; and then, the psychopathic indicants of his physiognomy."

"Well," admitted Markham, "the question had its

effect. . . . I feel that I shall see this fashionable M.D. again."

"You will," iterated Vance. "We took him unawares. But when he has had time to ponder the matter and concoct an appealin' tale, he'll become downright garrulous. . . . Anyhow, the evening is over, and you can meditate on buttercups till the morrow."

But the evening was not quite over as far as the Odell case was concerned. We had been back in the lounge-room of the club but a short time when a man walked by the corner in which we sat, and bowed with formal courtesy to Markham. Markham, to my surprise, rose and greeted him, at the same time indicating a chair.

"There's something further I wanted to ask you, Mr. Spotswoode," he said, "if you can spare a moment"

At the mention of the name I regarded the man closely, for, I confess, I was not a little curious about the anonymous escort who had taken the girl to dinner and the theatre the night before. Spotswoode was a typical New England aristocrat, inflexible, slow in his movements, reserved, and quietly but modishly dressed. His hair and moustache were slightly grey— which, no doubt, enhanced the pinkness of his complexion. He was just under six feet tall, and well proportioned, but a trifle angular.

Markham introduced him to Vance and me, and briefly explained that we were working with him on the case, and that he had thought it best to take us fully into his confidence.

Spotswoode gave him a dubious look, but immediately bowed his acceptance of the decision.

"I'm in your hands, Mr. Markham," he replied, in a well-bred but somewhat high-pitched voice, "and I concur, of course, with whatever you think advisable." He turned to Vance with an apologetic smile. "I'm in a rather unpleasant position, and naturally feel a little sensitive about it."

"I'm something of an antinomian," Vance pleasantly

informed him. "At any rate, I'm not a moralist; so my attitude in the matter is quite academic."

Spotswoode laughed softly.

"I wish my family held a similar point of view; but I'm afraid they would not be so tolerant of my foibles."

"It's only fair to tell you, Mr. Spotswoode," interposed Markham, "that there is a bare possibility I may have to call you as a witness."

The man looked up quickly, his face clouding over, but he made no comment.

"The fact is," continued Markham, "we are about to make an arrest, and your testimony may be needed to establish the time of Miss Odell's return to her apartment, and also to substantiate the fact that there was presumably someone in her rooms after you had left. Her screams and calls for help, which you heard, may prove vital evidence in obtaining a conviction."

Spotswoode seemed rather appalled at the thought of his relations with the girl becoming public, and for several minutes he sat with averted eyes.

"I see your point," he acknowledged at length. "But it would be a terrible thing for me if the fact of my delinquencies became known."

"That contingency may be entirely avoided," Markham encouraged him. "I promise you that you will not be called upon unless it is absolutely necessary. . . . And now what I especially wanted to ask you is this: do you happen to know a Doctor Lindquist who, I understand, was Miss Odell's personal physician?"

Spotswoode was frankly puzzled. "I never heard the name," he answered. "In fact, Miss Odell never mentioned any doctor to me."

"And did you ever hear her mention the name of Skeel . . . or refer to anyone as Tony?"

"Never." His answer was emphatic.

Markham lapsed into a disappointed silence. Spotswoode, too, was silent ; he sat as if in a reverie.

"You know, Mr. Markham," he said, after several minutes, "I ought to be ashamed to admit it, but the truth is I cared a good deal for the girl. I suppose you've kept her apartment intact. . . ." He hesitated, and a look almost of appeal came into his eyes. "I'd like to see it again if I could."

Markham regarded him sympathetically, but finally shook his head.

"It wouldn't do. You'd be sure to be recognised by the operator—or there might be a reporter about—and then I'd be unable to keep you out of the case."

The man appeared disappointed, but did not protest ; and for several minutes no one spoke. Then Vance raised himself slightly in his chair.

"I say, Mr. Spotswoode, do you happen to remember anything unusual occurring last night during the half-hour you remained with Miss Odell after the theatre ?"

"Unusual ?" The man's manner was eloquent of his astonishment. "To the contrary. We chatted a while, and then, as she seemed tired, I said good night and came away, making a luncheon appointment with her for to-day."

"And yet, it now seems fairly certain that some other man was hiding in the apartment when you were there."

"There's little doubt on that point," agreed Spotswoode, with the suggestion of a shudder. "And her screams would seem to indicate that he came forth from hiding a few minutes after I went."

"And you had no suspicion of the fact when you heard her call for help ?"

"I did at first—naturally. But when she assured me that nothing was the matter, and told me to go home, I attributed her screams to a nightmare. I knew she had been tired, and I left her in the wicker chair near the door, from where her screams seemed to come ; so I naturally concluded she had

dozed off and called out in her sleep. . . . If only I hadn't taken so much for granted!"

"It's a harrowin' situation." Vance was silent for a while; then he asked: "Did you, by any chance, notice the door of the living-room closet? Was it open or closed?"

Spotswoode frowned, as if attempting to visualise the picture; but the result was a failure.

"I suppose it was closed. I probably would have noticed it if it had been open."

"Then you couldn't say if the key was in the lock or not?"

"Good Lord, no! I don't even know if it ever had a key."

The case was discussed for another half-hour; then Spotswoode excused himself and left us.

"Funny thing," ruminated Markham, "how a man of his upbringing could be so attracted by the empty headed, butterfly type"

"I'd say it was quite natural," returned Vance. . . .
"You're such an incorrigible moralist, Markham."

Chapter XII

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

(Wednesday, September 12th; 9 a.m.)

THE following day, which was Wednesday, not only brought forth an important and, as it appeared, conclusive development in the Odell case, but marked the beginning of Vance's active co-operation in the proceedings. The psychological elements in the case had appealed to him irresistibly, and he felt, even at this stage of the investigation, that a final answer could never be obtained along the usual police lines. At his request Markham had called for him at a little before nine o'clock, and we had driven direct to the District Attorney's office.

Fleath was waiting impatiently when we arrived. His eager and covertly triumphant expression plainly indicated good news.

"Things are breaking fine and dandy," he announced, when we had sat down. He himself was too elated to relax, and stood before Markham's desk rolling a large black cigar between his fingers. "We got the Dude—six o'clock yesterday evening—and we got him right. One of the C. O. boys, named Riley, who was patrolling Sixth Avenue in the Thirties, saw him swing off a surface car and head for McAnerny's Pawn-Shop. Right away Riley wigwags the traffic officer on the corner, and follows the Dude into McAnerny's. Pretty soon the traffic officer comes in with a patrolman, who he's picked up; and the three of 'em nab our stylish friend in the act of pawning this ring."

He tossed a square solitaire diamond in a flagreed platinum setting on the District Attorney's desk

"I was at the office when they brought him in, and I sent Snitkin with the ring up to Harlem to see what the maid had to say about it, and she identified it as belonging to Odell"

"But, I say, it wasn't a part of the *briouette* the lady was wearing that night, was it, Sergeant?" Vance put the question casually

Heath jerked about and eyed him with sullen calculation

"What if it wasn't? It came out of that jimmied jewel-case—or I'm Ben Hur"

"Of course, it did," murmured Vance, lapsing into lethargy

"And that's where we're in luck," declared Heath, turning back to Mukham "It connects Steel directly with the murder and the robbery"

"What has Steel to say about it?" Mukham was leaning forward intently "I suppose you question him"

"I'll say we did," replied the Sergeant, but his tone was troubled "We had him up all night giving him the works And the story he tells is this—he says the girl gave him the ring a week ago, and that he didn't see her again until the afternoon of day before yesterday He came to her apartment between four and five—you remember the maid said she was out then—and entered and left the house by the side door, which was unlocked at that time He admits he called again at half-past nine that night, but he says that, when he found she was out, he went straight home and stayed there His alibi is that he sat up with his landlady till after midnight playing Khun Khan and drinking beer I hopped up to his place this morning, and the old girl verified it But that don't mean anything The house he lives in is a pretty tough hang out, and this landlady, besides being a heavy boozer, has been up the river a couple of times for shoplifting"

"What does Skeel say about the finger prints?"

"He says, of course, he made 'em when he was there in the afternoon."

"And the one on the closet door-knob?"

Heath gave a derisive grunt.

"He's got an answer for that, too—says he thought he heard someone coming in, and locked himself in the clothes-closet. Didn't want to be seen and spoil any game Odell mighta been playing."

"Most considerate of him to keep out of the way of the *belles poires*," drawled Vance. "Touchin' loyalty, what?"

"You don't believe the rat, do you, Mr. Vance?" asked Heath, with indignant surprise.

"Can't say that I do. But our Antonio at least spins a consistent yarn."

"Too damn consistent to suit me," growled the Sergeant.

"That's all you could get out of him?" It was plain that Markham was not pleased with the results of Heath's third degree of Skeel.

"That's about all, sir. He stuck to his story like a leech."

"You found no chisel in his room?"

Heath admitted that he hadn't.

"But you couldn't expect him to keep it around," he added.

Markham pondered the facts for several minutes.

"I can't see that we've got a very good case, however much we may be convinced of Skeel's guilt. His alibi may be thin, but taken in connection with the phone operator's testimony, I'm inclined to think it would hold tight in court."

"What about the ring, sir?" Heath was desperately disappointed. "And what about his threats, and his finger-prints, and his record of similar burglaries?"

"Contributory factors only," Markham explained. "What we need for a murder is more than a *prima facie* case. A good criminal lawyer could have him discharged

in twenty minutes, even if I could secure an indictment. It's not impossible, you know, that the woman gave him the ring a week ago—you recall that the maid said he was demanding money from her about that time. And there's nothing to show that the finger-prints were not actually made late Monday afternoon. Moreover, we can't connect him in any way with the chisel, for we don't know who did the Park Avenue job last summer. His whole story fits the facts perfectly; and we haven't anything contradictory to offer."

Heath shrugged helplessly: all the wind had been taken out of his sails.

"What do you want done with him? he asked desolately.

Markham considered—he, too, was discomfited

"Before I answer I think I'll have a go at him myself."

He pressed a buzzer, and ordered a clerk to fill out the necessary requisition. When it had been signed in duplicate, he sent Swacker with it to Ben Hanlon.

"Do ask him about those silk shirts," suggested Vance. "And find out, if you can, if he considers a white waistcoat *de rigueur* with a dinner-jacket."

"This office isn't a male millinery shop," snapped Markham.

"But, Markham dear, you won't learn anything else from this Petronius."

Ten minutes later a Deputy Sheriff from the Tombs entered with his handcuffed prisoner.

Skeel's appearance that mornin' belied his sobriquet of Dude. He was haggard and pale. His ordeal of the previous night had left its imprint upon him. He was unshaven; his hair was uncombed; the ends of his moustache drooped; and his cravat was awry. But despite his bedraggled condition, his manner was jaunty and contemptuous. He gave Heath a defiant leer, and faced the District Attorney with swaggering indifference.

To Markham's questions he doggedly repeated the same

story he had told Heath. He clung tenaciously to every detail of it with the ready accuracy of a man who had painstakingly memorised a lesson and was thoroughly familiar with it. Markham coaxed, threatened, bullied. All hint of his usual affability was gone: he was like an inexorable dynamic machine. But Skeel, whose nerves seemed to be made of iron, withstood the vicious fire of his cross-questioning without wincing; and, I confess, his resistance somewhat aroused my admiration despite my revulsion toward him and all he stood for.

After half an hour Markham gave up, completely baffled in his efforts to elicit any damaging admissions from the man. He was about to dismiss him when Vance rose languidly and strolled to the District Attorney's desk. Seating himself on the edge of it, he regarded Skeel with impersonal curiosity.

"So you're a devotee of Khun Khan, eh?" he remarked indifferently. "Silly game, what? More interestin' than Conquain or Rum, though. Used to be played in the London clubs. Of East Indian origin, I believe. . . . You still play it with two decks, I suppose, and permit round-the-corner matting?"

An involuntary frown gathered on Skeel's forehead. He was used to violent district attorneys, and familiar with the bludgeoning methods of the police, but here was a type of inquisitor entirely new to him; and it was plain that he was both puzzled and apprehensive. He decided to meet this novel antagonist with a smirk of arrogant amusement.

"By the bye," continued Vance, with no change in tone, "can anyone hidden in the clothes-press of the Odell living-room see the davenport through the keyhole?"

Suddenly all trace of a smile was erased from the man's features.

"And I say," Vance hurried on, his eyes fixed steadily on the other, "why didn't you give the alarm?"

I was watching Skeel closely, and, though his set expression did not alter, I saw the pupils of his eyes dilate. Markham, also, I think, noted this phenomenon.

"Don't bother to answer," pursued Vance, as the man opened his lips to speak. "But tell me: didn't the sight shake you up a bit?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Skeel retorted with sullen impertinence. But, for all his sang-froid, one sensed an uneasiness in his manner. There was an overtone of effort in his desire to appear indifferent, which robbed his words of complete conviction.

"Not a pleasant situation, that." Vance ignored his retort. "How did you feel, crouching there in the dark, when the closet door-knob was turned and someone tried to get in?" His eyes were boring into the man, though his voice retained its casual intonation.

The muscles of Skeel's face tightened, but he did not speak.

"Lucky thing you took the precaution of locking yourself in—eh, what?" Vance went on. "Suppose he'd got the door open—my word! Then what? . . ."

He paused and smiled with a kind of silky sweetness which was more impressive than any glowering aggression.

"I say, did you have your steel chisel ready for him? Maybe he'd have been too quick and strong for you—maybe there would have been thumbs pressing against your larynx too before you could have struck him—eh? . . . Did you think of that, there in the dark? . . . No, not precisely a pleasant situation. A bit gruesome, in fact."

"What are you raving about?" Skeel spat out insolently. "You're balmy." But his swagger had been forgotten, and a look akin of horror had passed across his face. This slackening of pose was momentary, however; almost at once his smirk returned, and his head swayed in contempt.

Vance sauntered back to his chair and stretched himself

in it listlessly, as if all his interest in the case had again evaporated.

Markham had watched the little drama attentively, but Heath had sat smoking with ill-concealed annoyance. The silence that followed was broken by Skeel.

"Well, I suppose I'm to be railroaded. Got it all planned, have you? . . . Try and railroad me!" He laughed harshly. "My lawyer's Abe Rubin, and you might phone him that I'd like to see him."

Markham, with a gesture of annoyance, waved to the Deputy Sheriff to take Skeel back to the Tombs.

"What were you trying to get at?" he asked Vance, when the man was gone.

"Just an illusive notion in the depths of my being struggling for the light." Vance smoked placidly a moment. "I thought Mr. Skeel might be persuaded to pour out his heart to us. So I wooed him with words."

"That's just bully," jibed Heath. "I was expecting you any minute to ask him if he played mumbly-peg or if his grandmother was a hoot-owl."

"Sergeant, dear Sergeant," pleaded Vance, "don't be unkind. I simply couldn't endure it. . . . And really, now, didn't my chat with Mr. Skeel suggest a possibility to you?"

"Sure," said Heath, "—that he was hiding in the closet when Odell was killed. But where does that get us? It lets Skeel out, although the job was a profession. I one, and he was caught red-handed with some of the swag."

He turned disgustedly to the District Attorney.

"And now what, sir?"

"I don't like the look of things," Markham complained. "If Skeel has Abe Rubin to defend him, we won't stand a chance with the case we've got. I feel convinced he was

¹ Abe Rubin was at that time the most resourceful and unscrupulous criminal lawyer in New York. Since his disbarment two years ago little has been heard from him.

mixed up in it; but no judge will accept my personal feelings as evidence."

"We could turn the Dude loose, and have him tailed," suggested Heath grudgingly. "We might catch him doing something that'll give the game away."

Markham considered.

"That might be a good plan," he acceded. "We'll certainly get no more evidence on him as long as he's locked up."

"It looks like our only chance, sir."

"Very well," agreed Markham. "Let him think we're through with him: he may get careless. I'll leave the whole thing to you, Sergeant. Keep a couple of good men on him day and night. Something may happen."

Heath rose, an unhappy man.

"Right, sir. I'll attend to it."

"And I'd like to have more data on Charles Cleaver," added Markham. "Find out what you can of his relations with the Odell girl—Also, get me a line on Doctor Ambrose Lindquist. What's his history?—what are his habits?—you know the kind of thing. He treated the girl for some mysterious or imaginary ailment; and I think he has something up his sleeve. But don't go near him personally—yet."

Heath jotted the name down in his note-book without enthusiasm.

"And before you set your stylish captive free," put in Vance, yawning, "you might, don't y' know, see if he carries a key that fits the Odell apartment."

Heath jerked up short, and grinned.

"Now, that idea's got some sense to it. . . . Funny I didn't think of it myself." And shaking hands with all of us, he went out.

Chapter XIII

AN ERSTWHILE GALLANT

(Wednesday, September 12th ; 10.30 a.m.)

SWACKER was evidently waiting for an opportunity to interrupt, for, when Sergeant Heath had passed through the door, he at once stepped into the room.

"The reporters are here, sir," he announced, with a wry face. "You said you'd see them at ten-thirty"

In response to a nod from his Chief, he held open the door, and a dozen or more newspaper men came trooping in

"No questions, please, this morning," Markham begged pleasantly. "It's too early in the game. But I'll tell you all I know. . . . I agree with Sergeant Heath that the Odell murder was the work of a professional criminal—the same who broke into Arnheim's house on Park Avenue last summer."

Briefly he told of Inspector Brenner's findings in connection with the chisel

"We've made no arrests, but one may be expected in the very near future. In fact, the police have the case well in hand, but are going carefully in order to avoid any chance of an acquittal. We've already recovered some of the missing jewellery. . . ."

He talked to the reporters for five minutes or so, but he made no mention of the testimony of the maid or the phone operators, and carefully avoided the mention of any names.

When we were again alone, Vance chuckled admiringly.

"A masterly evasion, my dear Markham! Legal training

has its advantages—decidedly, it has its advantages. . . . 'We've recovered some of the missing jewellery!' Sweet winged words! Not an untruth—oh, no!—but how deceivin'! Really, y' know, I must devote more time to the caressin' art of *suggestio falsi* and *suppressio veri*. You should be crowned with an anadem of myrtle."

"Leaving all that to one side," Markham rejoined impatiently, "suppose you tell me, now that Heath's gone, what was in your mind when you applied your verbal voodooism to Skeel? What was all the conjurer-talk about dark closets, and alarms, and pressing thumbs, and peering through keyholes?"

"Well, now, I didn't think my little chit-chat was so cryptic," answered Vance. "The *recherché* Tony was undoubtedly ambuscaded *à la sourdine* in the clothes-press at some time during the fatal evening; and I was merely striving, in my amateurish way, to ascertain the exact hour of his concealment."

"And did you?"

"Not conclusively." Vance shook his head sadly. "Y' know, Markham, I'm the proud possessor of a theory—it's vague and obscure and unsubstantial; and it's downright unintelligible. And even if it were verified, I can't see how it would help us any, for it would leave the situation even more incomprehensible than it already is. . . . I almost wish I hadn't questioned Heath's Beau Nash. He upset my ideas frightfully."

"From what I could gather, you seem to think it possible that Skeel witnessed the murder. That couldn't, by any stretch of the imagination, be your precious theory?"

"That's part of it, anyway."

"My dear Vance, you do astonish me!" Markham laughed outright. "Skeel, then, according to you, is innocent; but he keeps his knowledge to himself, invents an alibi, and doesn't even tattle when he's arrested. . . . It won't hold water."

"I know," sighed Vance. "It's a veritable sieve. And yet, the notion haunts me—it rides me like a hag—it eats into my vitals."

"Do you realise that this mad theory of yours presupposes that, when Spotswoode and Miss Odell returned from the theatre, there were *two* men hidden in the apartment—two men *unknown to each other*—namely Skeel and your hypothetical murderer?"

"Of course I realise it; and the thought of it is breaking down my reason."

"Furthermore, they must have entered the apartment separately, and hidden separately. . . . How, may I ask, did they get in? And how did they get out? And which one caused the girl to scream after Spotswoode had left? And what was the other one doing in the meantime? And if Skeel was a passive spectator, horrified and mute, how do you account for his breaking open the jewel-case and securing the ring —?"

"Stop! Stop! Don't torture me so," Vance pleaded. "I know I'm insane. Been given to hallucinations since birth; but—Merciful Heaven!—I've never before had one as crazy as this."

"On that point at least, my dear Vance, we are in complete and harmonious agreement," smiled Markham.

Just then Swacker came in and handed Markham a letter.

"Brought by messenger, and marked 'immediate,'" he explained.

The letter, written on heavy engraved stationery, was from Doctor Lindquist, and explained that between the hours of 11 p.m. and 1 a.m. on Monday night he had been in attendance on a patient at his sanatorium. It also apologized for his actions when asked regarding his whereabouts, and offered a wordy, but not particularly convincing, explanation of his conduct. He had had an unusually trying day, it seemed—neurotic cases were trying, at best—and the suddenness of our visit, together with the apparently

hostile nature of Markham's questions, had completely upset him. He was more than sorry for his outburst, he said, and stood ready to assist in any way he could. It was unfortunate for all concerned, he added, that he had lost his temper, for it would have been a simple matter for him to explain about Monday night.

"He has thought the situation over calmly," said Vance, "and hereby offers you a neat little alibi which, I think, you will have difficulty in shaking. . . . An artful beggar—like all these unbalanced pseudo-psychiatrists Observe: he was with a patient. To be sure! What patient? Why, one too ill to be questioned. . . . There you are. A *cul-de-sac* masquerading as an alibi. Not bad, what?"

"It doesn't interest me overmuch" Markham put the letter away. "That pompous professional ass could never have got into the Odell apartment without having been seen; and I can't picture him sneaking in by devious means." He reached for some papers. . . . "And now, if you don't object, I'll make an effort to earn my \$15,000 salary."

But Vance, instead of making a move to go, sauntered to the table and opened a telephone directory.

"Permit me a suggestion, Markham," he said, after a moment's search. "Put off your daily grind for a bit, and let's hold polite converse with Mr Louis Mannix Y' know, he's the only presumptive swain of the inconstant Margaret, so far mentioned, who hasn't been given an audience. I hanker to gaze upon him and hearken to his rune He'd make the family circle complete, so to speak. . . . He still holds forth in Maiden Lane, I see; and it wouldn't take long to fetch him here"

Markham had swung half round in his chair at the mention of Mannix's name. He started to protest, but he knew from experience that Vance's suggestions were not the results of idle whims; and he was silent for several moments weighing the matter. With practically every other avenue

of inquiry closed for the moment, I think the idea of questioning Mannix rather appealed to him.

"All right," he consented, ringing for Swacker; "though I don't see how he can help. According to Heath, the Odell girl gave him his *congé* a year ago."

"He may still have hay on his horns, or, like Hotspur, be drunk with choler. You can't tell." Vance resumed his chair. "With such a name, he'd bear investigation *ipso facto*."

Markham sent Swacker for Tracey; and when the latter arrived, suave and beaming, he was given instructions to take the District Attorney's car and bring Mannix to the office.

"Get a subpoena," said Markham, "and use it if necessary."

Half an hour or so later Tracey returned. "Mr. Mannix made no difficulty about coming," he reported. "Was quite agreeable, in fact. He's in the waiting-room now."

Tracy was dismissed, and Mannix was ushered in.

He was a large man, and he walked with the forced elasticity of gait which epitomises the silent struggle of incipiently corpulent middle age to deny the onrush of the years and cling to the semblance of youth. He carried a slender wanghee cane; and his checkered suit, brocaded waistcoat, pearl-grey gaiters, and gaily beribboned Homburg hat gave him an almost foppish appearance. But these various indications of sportiveness were at once forgotten when one inspected his features. His small eyes were bright and crafty; his nose was bibative, and appeared disproportionately small above his thick sensual lips and prognathous jaw. There was an oiliness and shrewdness in the man's manner which were at once repulsive and arresting.

At a gesture from Markham he sat down on the edge of a chair, placing a podgy hand on each knee. His attitude was one of alert suspicion.

"Mr. Mannix," said Markham, an engaging note of

apology in his voice, "I am sorry to have discommoded you; but the matter in hand is both serious and urgent. . . . A Miss Margaret Odell was murdered night before last, and in the course of our inquiries we learned that you had at one time known her quite well. It occurred to me that you might be in possession of some facts about her that would assist us in our investigation."

A saponaceous smile, meant to be genial, parted the man's heavy lips

"Sure, I knew the Canary—a long time ago, y' understand." He permitted himself a sigh "A fine, high-class girl, if I do say so. A good looker and a good dresser. Too damn bad she didn't go on with the show business. But"—he made a repudiative motion with his hand—"I haven't seen the lady, y' understand, for over a year—not to speak to, if you know what I mean"

Mannix clearly was on his guard, and his beady little eyes did not once leave the District Attorney's face

"You had a quarrel with her perhaps?" Markham asked the question incuriously.

"Well, now, I wouldn't go so far as to say we quarrelled. No." Mannix paused, seeking the correct word. "You might say we disagreed—got tired of the arrangement and decided to separate; kind of drifted apart. Last thing I told her was, if she ever needed a friend she'd know where to find me."

"Very generous of you," murmured Markham "And you never renewed your little affair?"

"Never—never. Don't remember ever speaking to her from that day to this."

"In view of certain things I've learned, Mr Mannix"—Markham's tone was regretful—"I must ask you a somewhat personal question. Did she ever make an attempt to blackmail you?"

Mannix hesitated, and his eyes seemed to grow even smaller, like those of a man thinking rapidly.

"Certainly not!" he replied, with belated emphasis. "Not at all. Nothing of the kind." He raised both hands in protest against the thought. Then he asked furtively: "What gave you such an idea?"

"I have been told," explained Markham, "that she had extorted money from one or two of her admirers."

Mannix made a wholly unconvincing grimace of astonishment.

"Well, well! You don't tell me! Can it be possible?" He peered shrewdly at the District Attorney. "Maybe it was Charlie Cleaver she blackmailed—yes?"

Markham picked him up quickly.

"Why do you say Cleaver?"

Again Mannix waved his thick hand, this time deprecatingly.

"No special reason, y' understand. Just thought it might be him. . . . No special reason."

"Did Cleaver ever tell you he'd been blackmailed?"

"Cleaver tell me? . . . Now, I ask you, Mr. Markham: why should Cleaver tell me such a story—why should he?"

"And you never told Cleaver that the Odell girl had blackmailed you?"

"Positively not!" Mannix gave a scornful laugh which was far too theatrical to have been genuine. "Me tell Cleaver I'd been blackmailed? Now, that's funny, that is."

"Then why did you mention Cleaver a moment ago?"

"No reason at all—like I told you. . . . He knew the Canary; but that ain't no secret."

Markham dropped the subject.

"What do you know about Miss Odell's relations with a Doctor Ambrose Lindquist?"

Mannix was now obviously perplexed.

"Never heard of him—no, never. She didn't know him when I was taking her around."

"Whom else besides Cleaver did she know well?"

Mannix shook his head ponderously.

"Now, that I couldn't say—positively I couldn't say. Seen her with this man and that, same as everybody saw her; but who they were I don't know—absolutely."

"Ever hear of Tony Skeel?" Markham quickly leaned over and met the other's gaze inquiringly.

Once more Mannix hesitated, and his eyes glittered calculatingly.

"Well, now that you ask me, I believe I did hear of the fellow. But I couldn't swear to it, y' understand. . . . What makes you think I heard of this Skeel fellow?"

Markham ignored the question.

"Can you think of no one who might have borne Miss Odell a grudge, or had cause to fear her?"

Mannix was volubly emphatic on the subject of his complete ignorance of any such person; and after a few more questions, which elicited only denials, Markham let him go.

"Not bad at all, Markham old thing—eh, what?" Vance seemed pleased with the conference. "Wonder why he's so coy? Not a nice person, this Mannix. And he's so fearful lest he be informative. Again, I wonder why. He was so careful—oh, so careful."

"He was sufficiently careful, at any rate, not to tell us anything," declared Markham gloomily.

"I shouldn't say that, don't y' know" Vance lay back and smoked placidly. "A ray of light filtered through here and there. Our fur-importing philogynist denied he'd been blackmailed—which was obviously untrue and tried to make us believe that he and the lovely Margaret cooed like turtle-doves at parting. Tosh! . . . And then, that mention of Cleaver. That wasn't spontaneous—dear me, no. Brother Mannix and spontaneity are as the poles apart. He had a reason for bringing Cleaver in; and I fancy that if you knew what that reason was, you'd feel like flinging roses riotously, and that sort of thing. Why Cleaver? That *secret-de-Polichinelle* explanation was a bit weak. The orbits of these two paramours cross somewhere. On that point,

at least, Mannix inadvertently enlightened us. . . . Moreover, it's plain that he doesn't know our fashionable healer with the satyr ears. But, on the other hand, he's aware of the existence of Mr. Skeel, and would rather like to deny the acquaintance. . . . So—*voilà l'affaire*. Plenty of information; but—my word!—what to do with it?”

“I give it up,” acknowledged Markham hopelessly.

“I know: it's a sad, sad world,” Vance commiserated him. “But you must face the olla podrida with a bright eye. It's time for lunch, and a fillet of sole *Marguéry* will cheer you no end.”

Markham glanced at the clock, and permitted himself to be led to the Lawyers' Club.

Chapter XIV

VANCE OUTLINES A THEORY

(Wednesday, September 12th ; evening)

VANCE and I did not return to the District Attorney's office after lunch, for Markham had a busy afternoon before him, and nothing further was likely to transpire in connection with the Odell case until Sergeant Heath had completed his investigations of Cleaver and Doctor Lindquist. Vance had seats for Giordano's "*Madame Sans Gêne*," and two o'clock found us at the Metropolitan. Though the performance was excellent, Vance was too *distract* to enjoy it; and it was significant that, after the opera, he directed the chauffeur to the Stuyvesant Club. I knew he had a tea appointment, and that he had planned to motor to Longue Vue for dinner; and the fact that he should have dismissed these social engagements from his mind in order to be with Markham showed how intensely the problem of the murder had absorbed his interest.

It was after six o'clock when Markham came in, looking harassed and tired. No mention of the case was made during dinner, with the exception of Markham's casual remark that Heath had turned in his reports on Cleaver and Doctor Lindquist and Mannix. (It seemed that, immediately after lunch, he had telephoned to the Sergeant to add Mannix's name to the two others as a subject for inquiry.) It was not until we had retired to our favourite corner of the lounge-room that the topic of the murder was brought up for discussion.

And that discussion, brief and one-sided, was the beginning of an entirely new line of investigation—a line which, in the end, led to the guilty person.

Markham sank wearily into his chair. He had begun to show the strain of the last two days of fruitless worry. His eyes were a trifle heavy, and there was a grim tenacity in the lines of his mouth. Slowly and deliberately he lighted a cigar, and took several deep inhalations.

"Damn the newspapers!" he grumbled. "Why can't they let the District Attorney's office handle its business in its own way . . . Have you seen the afternoon papers? They're all clamouring for the murderer. You'd think I had him up my sleeve."

"You forget, my dear chap," grinned Vance, "that we are living under the benign and upliftin' reign of Democritus, which confers upon every ignoramus the privilege of promiscuously criticising his betters."

"I don't complain about criticism: it's the lurid imagination of these bright young reporters that galls me. They're trying to turn this sordid crime into a spectacular Borgia melodrama, with passion running rampant, and mysterious influences at work, and all the pomp and trappings of a mediæval romance. . . . You'd think even a schoolboy could see that it was only an ordinary robbery and murder of the kind that's taking place regularly throughout the country."

Vance paused in the act of lighting a cigarette, and his eyebrows lifted. Turning, he regarded Markham with a look of mild incredulity.

"I say! Do you really mean to tell me that your statement for the press was given out in good faith?"

Markham looked up in surprise.

"Certainly it was. . . . What do you mean by 'good faith'?"

Vance smiled indolently.

"I rather thought, don't y' know, that your oration to

the reporters was a bit of strategy to lull the real culprit into a state of false security, and to give you a clear field for investigation."

Markham contemplated him a moment.

"See here, Vance," he demanded irritably, "what are you driving at?"

"Nothing at all—really, old fellow," the other assured him affably. "I knew that Heath was deadly sincere about his belief in Skeel's guilt, but it never occurred to me, d' ye see, that you yourself actually regarded the crime as one committed by a professional burglar. I foolishly thought that you let Skeel go this morning in the hope that he would lead you somehow to the guilty person. I rather imagined you were spoofing the trusting Sergeant by pretending to fall in with his silly notion."

"Ah, I see! Still clinging to your weird theory that a brace of villains were present, hiding in separate clothes-closets, or something of the kind." Markham made no attempt to temper his sarcasm. "A sapient idea—so much more intelligent than Heath's!"

"I know it's weird. But it happens not to be any weirder than your theory of a lone yeggman."

"And for what reason, pray," persisted Markham, with considerable warmth, "do you consider the yeggman theory weird?"

"For the simple reason that it was not the crime of a professional thief at all, but the wilfully deceptive act of a particularly clever man who doubtless spent weeks in its preparation."

Markham sank back in his chair and laughed heartily.

"Vance, you have contributed the one ray of sunshine to an otherwise gloomy and depressing case."

Vance bowed with mock humility.

"It gives me great pleasure," was his dulcet rejoinder, "to be able to bring even a wisp of light into so clouded a mental atmosphere."

A brief silence followed. Then Markham asked :

"Is this fascinating and picturesque conclusion of yours regarding the highly intellectual character of the Odell woman's murderer based on your new and original psychological methods of deduction?" There was no mistaking the ridicule in his voice.

"I arrived at it," explained Vance sweetly, "by the same processes of logic I used in determining the guilt of Alvin Benson's murderer."

Markham smiled.

"*Touche!* . . . Don't think I'm so ungrateful as to belittle the work you did in that case. But this time, I fear, you've permitted your theories to lead you hopelessly astray. The present case is what the police call an open-and-shut affair."

"Particularly shut," amended Vance dryly. "And both you and the police are in the di-tressin' situation of waiting inactively for your suspected victim to give the game away."

"I'll admit the situation is not all one could desire." Markham spoke morosely. "But even so, I can't see that there's any opportunity in this affair for your recondite psychological methods. The thing's too obvious—that's the trouble. What we need now is evidence, not theories. If it wasn't for the spacious and romantic imaginings of the newspaper men, public interest in the case would already have died out."

"Markham," said Vance quietly, but with unwonted seriousness, "if that's what you really believe, then you may as well drop the case now; for you're foredoomed to failure. You think it's an obvious crime. But let me tell you, it's a subtle crime, if ever there was one. And it's as clever as it is subtle. No common criminal committed it—I believe me. It was done by a man of very superior intellect and astounding ingenuity."

Vance's assured, matter-of-fact tone had a curiously con-

vincing quality ; and Markham, restraining his impulse to scoff, assumed an air of indulgent irony.

"Tell me," he said, "by what cryptic mental process you arrived at so fantastic a conclusion."

"With pleasure." Vance took a few puffs on his cigarette and lazily watched the smoke curl upward.¹

"Y' know, Markham," he began, in his emotionless drawl, "every genuine work of art has a quality which the critics call *elan*—namely, enthusiasm and spontaneity. A copy, or imitation, lacks that distinguishing characteristic ; it's too perfect, too carefully done, too exact. Even enlightened scions of the law, I fancy, are aware that there is bad drawing in Botticelli and disproportions in Rubens, what ? In an original, d' ye see, such flaws don't matter. But an imitator never puts 'em in : he doesn't dare—he's too intent on getting all the details correct. The imitator works with a self-consciousness and a meticulous care which the artist, in the throes of creative labour, never exhibits. And here's the point : there's no way of imitating that enthusiasm and spontaneity—that *elan*—which an original painting possesses. However closely a copy may resemble an original, there's a vast psychological difference between them. The copy breathes an air of insincerity, of ultra-perfection, of conscious effort. . . . You follow me, eh ? "

"Most instructive, my dear Ruskin."

Vance meekly bowed his appreciation, and proceeded pleasantly

"Now, let us consider the Odell murder. You and Heath are agreed that it is a commonplace, brutal, sordid, unimaginative crime. But, unlike you two bloodhounds on the trail, I have ignored its mere appearances, and have analysed its various factors—I have looked at it psychologically, so to speak. And I have discovered that it is not a genuine and

¹ I sent a proof of the following paragraphs to Vance, and he edited and corrected them ; so that, as they now stand, they represent his theories in practically his own words.

sincere crime—that is to say, an original—but only a sophisticated, self-conscious and clever imitation, done by a skilful copyist. I grant you it is correct and typical in every detail. But just there is where it fails, don't y' know. Its technic is too good, its craftsmanship too perfect. The *ensemble*, as it were, is not convincing—it lacks *élan*. *Æsthetically* speaking, it has all the earmarks of a *tour de force*. Vulgarly speaking, it's a fake." He paused and gave Markham an engaging smile. "I trust this somewhat oracular peroration has not bored you."

"Pray continue," urged Markham, with exaggerated politeness. His manner was jocular, but something in his tone led me to believe that he was seriously interested.

"What is true of art is true of life," Vance resumed placidly. "Every human action, d' ye see, conveys unconsciously an impression either of genuineness or of spuriousness—of sincerity or calculation. For example, two men at table eat in a similar way, handle their knives and forks in the same fashion, and apparently do the identical things. Although the sensitive spectator cannot put his finger on the points of difference, he none the less senses at once which man's breeding is genuine and instinctive and which man's is imitative and self-conscious."

He blew a wreath of smoke toward the ceiling, and settled more deeply into his chair.

"Now, Markham, just what are the universally recognised features of a sordid crime of robbery and murder? . . . Brutality, disorder, haste, ransacked drawers, cluttered desks, broken jewel-cases, rings stripped from the victim's fingers, severed pendant chains, torn clothing, tipped over chairs, upset lamps, broken vases, twisted draperies, strewn floors, and so forth. Such are the accepted immemorial indications—eh, what? But—consider a moment, old chap. Outside of fiction and the drama, in how many crimes do they *all* appear—all in perfect ordination, and without a single element to contradict the genera-

effect? That is to say, how many actual crimes are technically perfect in their settings? . . . None! And why? Simply because nothing actual in this life—nothing that is spontaneous and genuine—runs to accepted form in every detail. The law of chance and fallibility invariably steps in."

He made a slight indicative gesture.

"But regard this particular crime: look at it closely. What do you find? You will perceive that its *mise-en-scene* has been staged, and its drama enacted, down to every minute detail like a Zola novel. It is almost mathematically perfect. And therein, d' ye see, lies the irresistible inference of its having been carefully premeditated and planned. To use an art term, it is a tickled-up crime. Therefore, its conception was not spontaneous. . . . And yet, don't y' know I can't point out any specific flaw; for its great flaw lies in its being flawless. And nothing flawless, my dear fellow, is natural or genuine."

Markham was silent for a while.

"You deny even the remote possibility of a common thief having murdered the girl?" he asked at length; and now there was no hint of sarcasm in his voice.

"If a common thief did it," contended Vance, "then there's no science of psychology, there are no philosophic truths, and there are no laws of art. If it was a genuine crime of robbery, then, by the same token, there is no difference whatever between an old master and a clever technician's copy."

"You'd entirely eliminate robbery as the motive, I take it."

"The robbery," Vance affirmed, "was only a manufactured detail. The fact that the crime was committed by a highly astute person indicates unquestionably that there was a far more potent motive behind it. Any man capable of so ingenious and clever a piece of deception is obviously a person of education and imagination; and he most certainly would not have run the stupendous risk of killing a

woman unless he had feared some overwhelming disaster—unless, indeed, her continuing to live would have caused him greater mental anguish, and would have put him in greater jeopardy, even than the crime itself. Between two colossal dangers, he chose the murder as the lesser.”

Markham did not speak at once: he seemed lost in reflection. But presently he turned and, fixing Vance with a dubious stare, said:

“What about that chiselled jewel-box? A professional burglar’s jimmy wielded by an experienced hand doesn’t fit into your æsthetic hypothesis—it is, in fact, diametrically opposed to such a theory.”

“I know it only too well.” Vance nodded slowly. “And I’ve been harried and hectored by that steel chisel ever since I beheld the evidence of its work that first morning. . . . Markham, that chisel is the one genuine note in an otherwise spurious performance. It’s as if the real artist had come along at the moment the copyist had finished his faked picture, and painted in a single small object with the hand of a master.”

“But doesn’t that bring us back inevitably to Skeel?”

“Skeel—ah, yes. That’s the explanation, no doubt; but not the way you conceive it. Skeel ripped the box open—I don’t question that; but—deuce take it!—it’s the only thing he did do: it’s the only thing that was left for him to do. That’s why he got only a ring which La Belle Marguerite was not wearing that night. All her other baubles—to wit, those that adorned her—had been stripped from her and were gone.”

“Why are you so positive on this point?”

“The poker, man—the poker! . . . Don’t you see? That amateurish assault upon the jewel-case with a cast-iron coal-prodder couldn’t have been made *after* the case had been prised open—it would have had to be made *before*. And that seemingly insane attempt to break steel with cast iron was part of the stage-setting. The real culprit didn’t

care if he got the case open or not. He merely wanted it to look as if he had *tried* to get it open ; so he used the poker and then left it lying beside the dented box."

"I see what you mean." This point, I think, impressed Markham more strongly than any other Vance had raised ; for the presence of the poker on the dressing-table had not been explained away either by Heath or Inspector Bienner. . . . "Is that the reason you questioned Skeel as if he might have been present when your other visitor was there?"

"Exactly. By the evidence of the jewel-case I knew he either was in the apartment when the bogus crime of robbery was being staged, or else had come upon the scene when it was over and the stage-director had cleared out. . . . From his reactions to my questions I rather fancy he was present."

"Hiding in the closet?"

"Yes. That would account for the closet not having been disturbed. As I see it, it wasn't ransacked, for the simple and rather grotesque reason that the elegant Skeel was locked within. How else could that one clothes-pres have escaped the visiting activities of the pseudo-burglar? He wouldn't have omitted it deliberately, and he was far too thorough-going to have overlooked it accidentally.—Then there are the finger-prints on the knob . . ."

Vance lightly tapped on the arm of his chair.

"I tell you, Markham, old dear, you simply must build your conception of the crime on this hypothesis, and proceed accordingly. If you don't, each edifice you rear will come toppling about your ears."

Chapter XV

FOUR POSSIBILITIES

(Wednesday, September 12th ; evening)

WHEN Vance finished speaking, there was a long silence. Markham, impressed by the other's earnestness, sat in a brown study. His ideas had been shaken. The theory of Skeel's guilt, to which he had clung from the moment of the identification of the finger-prints, had, it must be admitted, not entirely satisfied him, although he had been able to suggest no alternative. Now Vance had categorically repudiated this theory and at the same time had advanced another which, despite its indefiniteness, had nevertheless taken into account all the physical points of the case ; and Markham, at first antagonistic, had found himself, almost against his will, becoming more and more sympathetic to this new point of view.

"Damn it, Vance!" he said. "I'm not in the least convinced by your theatrical theory. And yet, I feel a curious undercurrent of plausibility in your analyses. . . . I wonder——"

He turned sharply, and scrutinised the other steadfastly for a moment.

"Look here! Have you any one in mind as the protagonist of the drama you've outlined?"

"'Pon my word, I haven't the slightest notion as to who killed the lady," Vance assured him. "But if you are ever to find the murderer, you must look for a shrewd, superior man with nerves of iron, who was in imminent danger of

being irremediably ruined by the girl—a man of inherent cruelty and vindictiveness; a supreme egoist; a fatalist more or less; and—I'm inclined to believe—something of a madman."

"Mad!"

"Oh, not a lunatic—just a madman, a perfectly normal, logical, calculating madman—same as you and I and Van here. Only, our hobbies are harmless, d'ye see. This chap's mania is outside your preposterously revered law. That's why you're after him. If his aberration were stamp-collecting, or golf, you wouldn't give him a second thought. But his perfectly rational *penchant* for eliminating *declassées* ladies who bothered him, fills you with horror: it's not *your* hobby. Consequently, you have a hot yearning to flay him alive"

"I'll admit," said Markham coolly, "that a homicidal mania is my idea of madness."

"But he didn't have a homicidal mania, Markham old thing. You miss all the fine distinctions in psychology. This man was annoyed by a certain person, and set to work, masterfully and reasonably, to do away with the source of his annoyance. And he did it with surpassin' cleverness. To be sure, his act was a bit grisly. But when, if ever, you get your hands on him, you'll be amazed to find how normal he is. And able, too—oh, able no end"

Again Markham lapsed into a long thoughtful silence. At last he spoke.

"The only trouble with your ingenious deductions is that they don't accord with the known circumstances of the case. And facts, my dear Vance, are still regarded by a few of us old fashioned lawyers as more or less conclusive."

"Why this needless confession of your shortcomings?" inquired Vance whimsically. Then, after a moment: "Let me have the facts which appear to you antagonistic to my deductions"

"Well, there are only four men of the type you describe

who could have had any remote reason for murdering the Odell woman. Heath's scouts went into her history pretty thoroughly, and for over two years—that is, since her appearance in the 'Follies'—the only *personæ gratae* at her apartment have been Mannix, Doctor Lindquist, Pop Cleaver, and, of course, Spotswoode. The Canary was a bit exclusive, it seems; and no other man got near enough to her even to be considered as a possible murderer."

"It appears, then, that you have a complete quartet to draw on." Vance's tone was apathetic. "What do you crave—a regiment?"

"No," answered Markham patiently. "I crave only one logical possibility. But Mannix was through with the girl over a year ago; Cleaver and Spotswoode both have watertight alibis; and that leaves only Doctor Lindquist, whom I can't exactly picture as a strangler and meretricious burglar, despite his irascibility. Moreover, he, too, has an alibi; and it may be a genuine one."

Vance wagged his head.

"There's something positively pathetic about the child-like faith of the legal mind."

"It does cling to rationality at times, doesn't it?" observed Markham.

"My dear fellow!" Vance rebuked him. "The presumption implied in that remark is most inmodest. If you could distinguish between rationality and irrationality you wouldn't be a lawyer—you'd be a god. . . . No; you're going at this thing the wrong way. The real factors in the case are not what you call the known circumstances, but the unknown quantities—the human *a's* so to speak—the personalities, or natures, of your quartet."

He lit a fresh cigarette, and lay back, closing his eyes.

"Tell me what you know of these four *cavalieri serventi*—you say Heath has turned in his report. Who were there *mammas*? What do they eat for breakfast? Are they

susceptible to poison-ivy? . . . Let's have Spotswoode's *dossier* first. Do you know anything about him?"

"In a general way," returned Markham. "Old Puritan stock, I believe—governors, burgomasters, a few successful traders. All Yankee forbears—no intermixture. As a matter of fact, Spotswoode represents the oldest and hardiest of the New England aristocracy—although I imagine the so-called wine of the Puritans has become pretty well diluted by now. His affair with the Odell girl is hardly consonant with the older Puritans' mortification of the flesh."

"It's wholly consonant, though, with the psychological reactions which are apt to follow the inhibitions produced by such mortification," submitted Vance. "But what does he do? Whence cometh his lucre?"

"His father manufactured automobile accessories, made a fortune at it, and left the business to him. He tinkers at it, but not seriously, though I believe he has designed a few appurtenances."

"I do hope the hideous cut glass olla for holding paper bouquets is not one of them. The man who invented that tonneau decoration is capable of any fiendish crime."

"It couldn't have been Spotswood then," said Markham tolerantly, "for he certainly can't qualify as your potential strangler. We know the girl was alive after he left her, and that, during the time she was murdered, he was with Judge Redfern. . . . Even you, friend Vance, couldn't manipulate those facts to the gentleman's disadvantage."

"On that, at least, we agree," conceded Vance. "And that's all you know of the gentleman?"

"I think that's all, except that he married a well-to-do roman—a daughter of a Southern senator, I believe."

"Doesn't help any. . . . And now, let's have Mannix's history."

Markham referred to a typewritten sheet of paper.

"Both parents immigrants—came over in the steerage.

Original name Mannikiewicz, or something like that. Born on the East Side; learned the fur business in his father's retail shop in Hester Street; worked for the Sanfrasco Cloak Company, and got to be factory foreman. Saved his money, and sweetened the pot by manipulating real estate; then went into the fur business for himself, and steadily worked up to his present opulent state. Public school, and night commercial college. Married in 1900 and divorced a year later. Lives a gay life—helps support the night clubs, but never gets drunk. I suppose he comes under the head of a spender and wine-opener. Has invested some money in musical comedies, and always has a stage beauty in tow. Runs to blondes."

"Not very revealin'," sighed Vance. "The city is full of Mannixes. . . . What did you garner in connection with our *bon-ton* medico?"

"The city has its quota of Doctor Lindquists, too, I fear. He was brought up in a small Middle-West bailiwick—French and Magyar extraction; took his M.D. from the Ohio State Medical, practised in Chicago—some shady business there, but never convicted; came to Albany and got in on the X-ray-machine craze; invented a breast-pump and formed a stock company—made a small fortune out of it; went to Vienna for two years——"

"Ah, the Freudian motif!"

"—returned to New York, and opened a private sanatorium; charged outrageous prices, and thereby endeared himself to the *nouveau riche*. Has been at the endearing process ever since. Was defendant in a breach of promise suit some years ago, but the case was settled out of court. He's not married."

"He wouldn't be," commented Vance. "Such gentry never are. . . . Interestin' summary, though—yes, decidedly interestin'. I'm tempted to develop a psycho-neurosis and let Ambroise treat me. I do so want to know him better. And where—oh, where—was this egregious

healer at the moment of our erring sister's demise? Ah, who can tell, my Markham: who knows—who knows?"

"In any event, I don't think he was murdering anyone"

"You're so prejudicial!" said Vance. "But let us move reluctantly on.—What's your *portrait parlé* of Cleaver? The fact that he's familiarly called Pop is helpful as a starter. You simply couldn't imagine Beethoven being called Shorty, or Bismarck being referred to as Snookums."

"Cleaver has been a politician most of his life—a Tammany Hall 'regular.' Was a ward-boss at twenty-five; ran a Democratic club of some kind in Brooklyn for a time; was an alderman for two terms, and practised general law. Was appointed Tax Commissioner; left politics, and raised a small racing-stable. Later secured an illegal gambling concession at Saratoga; and now operates a pool room in Jersey City. He's what you might call a professional sport. Loves his liquor"

"No marriages?"

"None on the records.—But see here. Cleaver's out of it. He was ticketed in Boonton that night at half-past eleven"

"Is that by any chance, the water-tight alibi you mentioned a moment ago?"

"In my primitive legal way I considered it as such" Markham resented Vance's question. "The summons was handed him at half-past eleven; it's so marked and dated. And Boonton is fifty miles from here—a good two hours' motor ride. Therefore, Cleaver unquestionably left New York about half-past nine; and even if he'd driven directly back, he couldn't have reached here until long after the time the Medical Examiner declared the girl was dead. As a matter of routine, I investigated the summons, and even spoke by phone to the officer who issued it. It was genuine enough—I ought to know: I had it quashed."

"Did this Boonton Dogberry know Cleaver by sight?"

"No, but he gave me an accurate description of him. And naturally he took the car's number."

Vance looked at Markham with open-eyed sorrow.

"My dear Markham—my very dear Markham—can't you see that all you've actually proved is that a bucolic traffic Nemesis handed a speed-violation summons to a smooth-faced, middle-aged, stout man who was driving Cleaver's car near Boonton at half-past eleven on the night of the murder? . . . And, my word! Isn't that exactly the sort of alibi the old boy would arrange if he intended taking the lady's life at midnight or thereabouts?"

"Come, come!" laughed Markham. "That's a bit too far-fetched. You'd give every law-breaker credit for concocting schemes of the most diabolical cunning."

"So I would," admitted Vance apathetically. "And—d'ye know?—I rather fancy that's just the kind of schemes a law-breaker would concoct, if he was planning a murder, and his own life was at stake. What really amazes me is the naïve assumption of you investigators that a murderer gives no intelligent thought whatever to his future safety. It's rather touchin', y' know."

Markham grunted.

"Well, you can take it from me, it was Cleaver himself who got that summons."

"I dare say you're right," Vance conceded. "I merely suggested the possibility of deception, don't y' know. The only point I really insist on is that the fascinatin' Miss Odell was killed by a man of subtle and superior mentality."

"And I, in turn," irritably rejoined Markham, "insist that the only men of that type who touched her life intimately enough to have had any reason to do it are Mannix, Cleaver, Lindquist, and Spotswoode. And I further insist that not one of them can be regarded as a promising possibility."

"I fear I must contradict you, old dear," said Vance serenely. "They're all possibilities—and one of them is guilty."

Markham glared at him derisively.

"Well, well! So the case is settled! Now, if you'll but indicate which is the guilty one, I'll arrest him at once, and return to my other duties."

"You're always in such haste," Vance lamented "Why leap and run? The wisdom of the world's philosophers is against it. *Festina lente*, says Cæsar; or, as Rufus has it, *Festinato tarda est*. And the Koran says quite frankly that haste is of the Devil. Shakespeare was constantly belittling speed:

'He tires betimes that spurs too fast betimes;'

and

'Wisely, and slow, they stumble that run fast'

Then there was Moliere—remember 'Sganarelle'?—: '*Le trop de promptitude à l'erreur nous expose*'. Chaucer also held similar views. 'He hasteth wel,' said he, 'that wysely can abyde.' Even God's common people have enbalméd the idea in numberless proverbs: 'Good and quickly seldom meet'; and 'Hasty men never want woe'."

Markham rose with a gesture of impatience.

"Hell! I'm going home before you start a bed time story," he growled

The ironical aftermath of this remark was that Vance did tell a "bedtime story" that night; but he told it to me in the seclusion of his own library; and the gist of it was this:

"Heath is committel, body and soul, to a belief in Skeel's guilt; and Markham is as effectively strangled with legal red tape as the poor Canary was strangled with powerful hands. *Eh u, Van!* There's nothing left for me but to set forth to-morrow *a capella*, like Gabeiriau's Monsieur Le Coq, and see what can be done in the noble cause of justice. I shall ignore both Heath and Markham, and become as a pelican of the wilderness, an owl of the desert, a sparrow alone upon the housetop. . . . Really, v' know, I'm no avenger of society, but I do detect an unsolved problem."

Chapter XVI

SIGNIFICANT DISCLOSURES

(Thursday, September 13th; forenoon)

GREATLY to Currie's astonishment Vance gave instructions to be called at nine o'clock the following morning; and at ten o'clock we were sitting on his little roof-garden having breakfast in the mellow mid-September sunshine.

"Van," he said to me, when Currie had brought us our second cup of coffee, "however secretive a woman may be, there's always someone to whom she unburdens her soul. A confidant is an essential to the feminine temperament. It may be a mother, or a lover, or a priest, or a doctor, or, more generally, a girl chum. In the Canary's case we haven't a mother or a priest. Her lover—the elegant Skeel—was a potential enemy; and we're pretty safe in ruling out her doctor—she was too shrewd to confide in such a creature as Lindquist. The girl chum, then, remains. And to-day we seek her." He lit a cigarette and rose. "But, first, we must visit Mr. Benjamin Browne of Seventh Avenue."

Benjamin Browne was a well-known photographer of stage celebrities, with galleries in the heart of the city's theatrical district; and as we entered the reception-room of his luxurious studio later that morning my curiosity as to the object of our visit was at the breaking-point. Vance went straight to the desk, behind which sat a young woman with flaming red hair and mascaro-shaded eyes, and bowed in his most dignified manner. Then, taking a small unmounted photograph from his pocket, he laid it before her.

"I am producing a musical comedy, *mademoiselle*," he said, "and I wish to communicate with the young lady who left this picture of herself with me. Unfortunately I've misplaced her card; but as her photograph bore the imprint of Browne's, I thought you might be good enough to look in your files and tell me who she is and where I may find her."

He slipped a five-dollar bill under the edge of the blotter and waited with an air of innocent expectancy.

The young woman looked at him quizzically, and I thought I detected the hint of a smile at the corners of her artfully rouged lips. But after a moment she took the photograph without a word and disappeared through a rear door. Ten minutes later she returned and handed Vance the picture. On the back of it she had written a name and address.

"The young lady is Miss Alys La Fosse, and she lives at the Belafield Hotel." There was now no doubt as to her smile. "You really shouldn't be so careless with the addresses of your applicants—some poor girl might lose an engagement." And her smile suddenly turned into soft laughter.

"*Mademoiselle*," replied Vance, with mock seriousness, "in the future I shall be guided by your warning." And with another dignified bow, he went out.

"Good Lord!" he said, as we emerged into Seventh Avenue. "Really, y' know, I should have disguised myself as an impresario, with a gold-headed cane, a derby, and a purple shirt. That young woman is thoroughly convinced that I'm contemplating an intrigue. . . A jolly smart *tête-rouge*, that."

He turned into a florist's shop at the corner, and selecting a dozen American Beauties, addressed them to "Benjamin Browne's Receptionist."

"And now," he said, "let us stroll to the Belafield, and seek an audience with Alys."

As we walked across town Vance explained.

"That first morning, when we were inspecting the Canary's rooms, I was convinced that the murder would never be solved by the usual elephantine police methods. It was a subtle and well-planned crime, despite its obvious appearances. No routine investigation would suffice. Intimate information was needed. Therefore, when I saw this photograph of the xanthous Alys half hidden under the litter of papers on the *escritoire*, I reflected: 'Ah! A girl friend of the departed Margaret's. She may know just the things that are needed.' So, when the Sergeant's broad back was turned, I put the picture in my pocket. There was no other photograph about the place, and this one bore the usual sentimental inscription, 'Ever thine,' and was signed 'Alys.' I concluded, therefore, that Alys had played Anactoria to the Canary's Sappho. Of course I erased the inscription before presenting the picture to the penetrating sibyl at Browne's. . . . And here we are at the Belafield, hopin' for a bit of enlightenment."

The Belafield was a small, expensive apartment-hotel in the East Thirties, which, to judge from the guests to be seen in the Americanised Queen Anne lobby, catered to the well-off sporting set. Vance sent his card up to Miss La Fosse, and received the message that she would see him in a few minutes. The few minutes, however, developed into three-quarters of an hour, and it was nearly noon when a resplendent bell-boy came to escort us to the lady's apartment.

Nature had endowed Miss La Fosse with many of its arts, and those that Nature had omitted, Miss La Fosse herself had supplied. She was slender and blonde. Her large blue eyes were heavily lashed, but though she looked at one with a wide-eyed stare, she was unable to disguise their sophistication. Her toilet had been made with elaborate care; and as I looked at her, I could not help

thinking what an excellent model she would have been for Chéret's pastel posters.

"So you are Mr. Vance," she cooed. "I've often seen your name in *Town Topics*."

Vance gave a shudder.

"And this is Mr. Van Dine," he said sweetly, "—a mere attorney, who, thus far, has been denied the pages of that fashionable weekly."

"Won't you sit down?" (I am sure Miss La Fosse had spoken the line in a play: she made of the invitation an impressive ceremonial.) "I really don't know why I should have received you. But I suppose you called on business. Perhaps you wish me to appear at a society bazaar, or something of the kind. But I'm so busy, Mr. Vance. You simply can't imagine how occupied I am with my work. . . . I just love my work," she added, with an ecstatic sigh.

"And I'm sure there are many thousands of others who love it too," returned Vance, in his best drawing-room manner. "But unfortunately I have no bazaar to be graced by your charming presence. I have come on a much more serious matter. . . . You were a very close friend of Miss Margaret Odell's——"

The mention of the Canary's name brought Miss La Fosse suddenly to her feet. Her ingratiating air of affected elegance had quickly disappeared. Her eyes flashed, and their lids drooped harshly. A sneer distorted the lines of her cupid's-bow mouth, and she tossed her head angrily.

"Say, listen! Who do you think you are? I don't know nothing, and I got nothing to say. So run along—you and your lawyer."

But Vance made no move to obey. He took out his cigarette-case and carefully selected a *Régie*.

"Do you mind if I smoke?—And won't you have one? I import them direct from my agent in Constantinople. They're exquisitely blended."

The girl snorted, and gave him a look of cold disdain. The doll-baby had become a virago.

"Get yourself outa my apartment, or I'll call the house detective." She turned to the telephone on the wall at her side.

Vance waited until she had lifted the receiver.

"If you do that, Miss La Fosse, I'll order you taken to the District Attorney's office for questioning," he told her indifferently, lighting his cigarette and leaning back in his chair.

Slowly she replaced the receiver and turned.

"What's your game, anyway? . . . Suppose I did know Margy—then what? And where do you fit into the picture?"

"Alas! I don't fit in at all." Vance smiled pleasantly. "But, for that matter, nobody seems to fit in. The truth is, they're about to arrest a poor blighter for killing your friend, who wasn't in the tableau, either. I happen to be a friend of the District Attorney's; and I know exactly what's being done. The police are scouting round in a perfect frenzy of activity, and it's hard to say what trail they'll strike next. I thought, don't y' know, I might save you a lot of unpleasantness by a friendly little chat. . . . Of course," he added, "if you prefer to have me give your name to the police, I'll do so, and let them hold the audition in their own inimitable but crude fashion. I might say, however, that, as yet, they are blissfully unaware of your relationship with Miss Odell, and that, if you are reasonable, I see no reason why they should be informed of it."

The girl had stood, one hand on the telephone, studying Vance intently. He had spoken carelessly and with a genial inflection; and she at length resumed her seat.

"Now, won't you have one of my cigarettes?" he asked, in a tone of gracious reconciliation.

Mechanically she accepted his offer, keeping her eyes on him all the time, as if attempting to determine how far he was to be trusted.

"Who are they thinking of arresting?" She asked the question with scarcely a movement of her features.

"A johnny named Skeel—Silly idea, isn't it?"

"Him!" Her tone was one of mingled contempt and disgust. "That cheap crook? He hasn't got nerve enough to strangle a cat."

"Precisely. But that's no reason for sending him to the electric chair, what?" Vance leaned forward and smiled engagingly. "Miss La Fosse, if you will talk to me for five minutes, and forget I'm a stranger, I'll give you my word of honour not to let the police or the District Attorney know anything about you. I'm not connected with the authorities, but somehow I dislike the idea of seeing the wrong man punished. And I'll promise to forget the source of any information you will be kind enough to give me. If you will trust me, it will be infinitely easier for you in the end."

The girl made no answer for several minutes. She was, I could see, trying to estimate Vance; and evidently she decided that, in any case, she had nothing to lose—now that her friendship with the Canary had been discovered—by talking to this man who had promised her immunity from further annoyance.

"I guess you're all right," she said, with a reservation of dubiety; "but I don't know why I should think so." She paused. "But, look here: I was told to keep out of this. And if I don't keep out of it, I'm apt to be back hoofing it in the chorus again. And that's no life for a sweet young thing like me with extravagant tastes—believe me, my friend!"

"That calamity will never befall you through any lack of discretion on my part," Vance assured her, with good-natured earnestness. . . . "Who told you to keep out of it?"

"My—fiancé." She spoke somewhat coquettishly. "He's very well known, and he's afraid there might be

scandal if I got mixed up in the case as a witness, or anything like that."

"I can readily understand his feelings." Vance nodded sympathetically. "And who, by the by, is this luckiest of men?"

"Say! You're good." She complimented him with a coy *moue*. "But I'm not announcing my engagement yet."

"Don't be horrid," begged Vance. "You know perfectly well that I could find out his name by making a few inquiries. And if you drove me to learn the facts elsewhere, then my promise to keep your name a secret would no longer bind me."

Miss La Fosse considered this point.

"I guess you could find out all right . . . so I might as well tell you—only I'm trusting to your word to protect me." She opened her eyes wide and gave Vance a melting look. "I know you wouldn't let me down."

"My dear Miss La Fosse!" His tone was one of pained surprise.

"Well, my fiancé is Mr. Mannix, and he's the head of a big fur importing house. . . . You see"—she became clingingly confidential—"Louis—that is, Mr. Mannix—used to go round with Margy. That's why he didn't want me to get mixed up in the affair. He said the police might bother him with questions, and his name might get into the papers. And that would hurt his commercial standing"

"I quite understand," murmured Vance. "And do you happen to know where Mr. Mannix was Monday night?"

The girl looked startled.

"Of course I know. He was right here with me from half-past ten until two in the morning. We were discussing a new musical show he was interested in; and he wanted me to take the leading rôle."

"I'm sure it will be a success." Vance spoke with disarming friendliness. "Were you home alone all Monday evening?"

"Hardly" The idea seemed to amuse her. "I went to the 'Scandals'—but I came home early. I knew Louis—Mr. Mannix—was coming."

"I trust he appreciated your sacrifice." Vance, I believe, was disappointed by this unexpected alibi of Mannix's. It was, indeed, so final that further interrogation concerning it seemed futile. After a momentary pause, he changed the subject.

"Tell me; what do you know about a Mr. Charles Cleaver? He was a friend of Miss Odell's."

"Oh, Pop's all right." The girl was plainly relieved by this turn in the conversation. "A good scout. He was certainly gone on Margy. Even after she threw him over for Mr. Spotswoode, he was faithful, as you might say—always running after her, sending her flowers and presents. Some men are like that. Poor old Pop! He even phoned me Monday night to call up Margy for him and try to arrange a party.—Maybe if I'd done it, she wouldn't be dead now. . . . It's a funny world, isn't it?"

"Oh, no end funny" Vance smoked calmly for a minute; I could not help admiring his self-control. "What time did Mr. Cleaver phone you Monday night—do you recall?" From his voice one would have thought the question of no importance

"Let me see . . ." She pursed her lips prettily. "It was just ten minutes to twelve. I remember that the little chime clock on the mantel over there was striking midnight, and at first I couldn't hear Pop very well. You see I always keep my clock ten minutes fast so I'll never be late for an appointment"

Vance compared the clock with his watch

"Yes, it's ten minutes fast.—And what about the party?"

"Oh, I was too busy talking about the new show, and I had to refuse. Anyway, Mr. Mannix didn't want to have a party that night. . . . It wasn't my fault, was it?"

"Not a bit of it," Vance assured her. "Work comes before pleasure—especially work as important as yours. . . . And now, there is one other man I want to ask you about, and then I won't bother you any more.—What was the situation between Miss Odell and Doctor Lindquist?"

Miss La Fosse became genuinely perturbed.

"I was afraid you were going to ask me about him." There was apprehension in her eyes. "I don't know just what to say. He was wildly in love with Margy; and she led him on, too. But she was sorry for it afterward, because he got jealous—like a crazy person. He used to pester the life out of her. And once—do you know!—he threatened to shoot her and then shoot himself. I told Margy to look out for him. But she didn't seem to be afraid. Anyway, I think she was taking awful chances. . . . Oh! Do you think it could have been—do you really think—?"

"And wasn't there anyone else," Vance interrupted, "who might have felt the same way?—anyone Miss Odell had reason to fear?"

"No." Miss La Fosse shook her head. "Margy didn't know many men intimately. She didn't change often, if you know what I mean. There wasn't anybody else outside of those you've mentioned, except, of course, Mr. Spotswoode. He cut Pop out—several months ago. She went to dinner with him Monday night, too. I wanted her to go to the 'Scandals' with me—that's how I know."

Vance rose and held out his hand.

"You've been very kind. And you have nothing whatever to fear. No one shall ever know of our little visit this morning."

"Who do you think killed Margy?" There was genuine emotion in the girl's voice. "Louis says it was probably some burglar who wanted her jewels."

"I'm too wise to sow discord in this happy ménage by even questioning Mr. Munnix's opinion," said Vance half

banteringly. "No one *knows* who's guilty; but the police agree with Mr. Mannix."

For a moment the girl's doubts returned, and she gave Vance a searching look.

"Why are you so interested? You didn't know Margy, did you? She never mentioned you."

Vance laughed.

"My dear child! I only wish I knew why I am so deuced concerned in this affair. 'Pon my word, I can't give you even the sketchiest explanation. . . . No, I never met Miss Odell. But it would offend my sense of proportion if Mr. Skeel were punished and the real culprit went free. Maybe I'm getting sentimental. A sad fate, what?"

"I guess I'm getting soft, too." She nodded her head, still looking Vance squarely in the eyes. "I risked my happy home to tell you what I did, because somehow I believed you. . . . Say, you weren't stringing me, by any chance?"

Vance put his hand on his heart, and became serious. . .

"My dear Miss La Fosse, when I leave here it will be as though I had never entered. Dismiss me and Mr. Van Dine here from your mind."

Something in his manner banished her misgivings, and she bade us a kittenish farewell.

Chapter XVII

CHECKING AN ALIBI

(Thursday, September 13th: afternoon)

"My sleuthing goes better," exulted Vance, when we were again in the street. "Fair Alys was a veritable mine of information—ch, what? Only, you should have controlled yourself better when she mentioned her beloved's name—really, you should, Van old thing. I saw you jump and heard you heave. Such emotion is most unbecoming in a lawyer."

From a booth in a drug-store near the hotel he telephoned Markham: "I am taking you to lunch. I have numerous confidences I would pour into your ear." A debate ensued, but in the end Vance emerged triumphant; and a moment later a taxicab was driving us down-town.

"Alys is clever—there are brains in that fluffy head," he ruminated. "She's much smarter than Heath; she knew at once that Skeel wasn't guilty. Her characterisation of the immaculate Tony was inelegant but how accurate—oh, how accurate! And you noticed, of course, how she trusted me. Touchin', wasn't it? . . . It's a knotty problem, Van. Something's amiss somewhere."

He was silent, smoking, for several blocks.

"Mannix. . . Curious he should crop up again. And he issued orders to Alys to keep mum. Now, why? Maybe the reason he gave her was the real one. Who knows?—On the other hand, was he with his *chère amie* from half-past ten till early morning? Well, well. Again, who knows?

Something queer about that business discussion. . . . Then Cleaver. He called up just ten minutes before midnight—oh, yes, he called up. That wasn't a fairy-tale. But how could he telephone from a speeding car? He couldn't. Maybe he really wanted to have a party with his recalcitrant Canary, don't y' know. But then, why the brummagem alibi? Funk? Maybe. But why the circuitousness?—why didn't he call his lost love direct? Ah, perhaps he did! Someone certainly called her by phone at twenty minutes to twelve. We must look into that, Van. . . . Yes, he may have called her, and then when a man answered—who the deuce was that man, anyway?—he may have appealed to Alys. Quite natural y' know. Anyway, he wasn't in Boonton.—Poor Markham! How upset he'll be when he finds out! . . . But what really worries me is that story of the doctor. Jealous mania: it squares with Ambroise's character perfectly. He's the kind that does go off his head. I knew his confession of paternalism was a red herring. My word! So the doctor was making threats and flourishing pistols, eh? Bad, bad. I don't like it. With those ears of his, he wouldn't hesitate to pull the trigger. Paranoia—that's it. Delusions of persecution. Probably thought the girl and Pop—or maybe the girl and Spotswoode—were plotting his misery and laughing at him. You can't tell about those chaps. They're deep—and they're dangerous. The canny Alys had him sized up—warned the Canary against him. . . . Taken by and large, it's a devilish tangle. Anyway, I feel rather bucked. We're moving—oh, undoubtedly we're moving—though in what direction I can't even guess. It's beastly annoyin'."

Markham was waiting for us at the Bankers' Club. He greeted Vance irritably.

"What have you got to tell me that's so damned important?"

"Now, don't get ratty," Vance was beaming. "How's your lode-star Skeel, behaving?"

"So far he's done everything that's pure and refined except join the Christian Endeavour Society."

"Sunday's coming. Give him time. . . . So you're not happy, Markham dear?"

"Was I dragged away from another engagement to report on my state of mind?"

"No need. Your state of mind's execrable. . . . Cheerio! I've brought you something to think about."

"Damn it! I've got too much to think about now."

"Here, have some brioche." Vance gave the order for lunch without consulting either of us. "And now for my revelations. *Imprimis*: Pop Cleaver wasn't in Boonton last Monday night. He was very much in the midst of our modern Gomorrah, trying to arrange a midnight party."

"Wonderful!" snorted Markham. "I live in the font of your wisdom. His *alter ego*, I take it, was on the road to Hopatcong. The supernatural leaves me cold."

"You may be as pancosmic as you choose. Cleaver was in New York at midnight Monday, craving excitement."

"What about the summons for speeding?"

"That's for you to explain. But if you'll take my advice you'll send for this Boonton catchpole, and let him have a look at Pop. If he says Cleaver is the man he ticketed, I'll humbly do away with myself."

"Well! That makes it worth trying. I'll have the officer at the Stuyvesant Club this afternoon, and I'll point out Cleaver to him. . . . What other staggering revelations have you in store?"

"Mannix will bear looking into."

Markham put down his knife and fork and leaned back.

"I'm overcome! Such Himalayan sagacity! With that evidence against him, he should be arrested at once. . . . Vance, my dear old friend, are you feeling quite normal? No dizzy spells lately? No shooting pains in the head? Knee-jerks all right?"

"Furthermore, Doctor Lindquist was wildly infatuated

with the Canary, and insanely jealous. Recently threatened to take a pistol and hold a little pogrom of his own."

"That's better" Markham sat up. "Where did you get this information?"

"Ah! That's my secret."

Markham was annoyed.

"Why so mysterious?"

"Needs must, old chap. Gave my word, and all that sort of thing. And I'm a bit quixotic, don't y' know—too much Cervantes in my youth." He spoke lightly, but Markham knew him too well to push the question.

In less than five minutes after we had returned to the District Attorney's office Heath came in.

"I've got something else on Mannix, sir; thought you might want to add it to the report I turned in yesterday. Burke secured a picture of him, and showed it to the phone operators at Odell's house. Both of 'em recognised it. He's been there several times, but it wasn't the Canary he called on. It was the woman in Apartment 2. She's named Frisbee, and used to be one of Mannix's fur models. He's been to see her several times during the past six months, and has taken her out once or twice; but he hasn't called on her for a month or more. . . . Any good?"

"Can't tell" Markham shot Vance an inquisitive look. "But thanks for the information, Sergeant."

"By the by," said Vance dulcetly, when Heath had left us, "I'm feeling top-hole. No pains in the head; no dizzy spells. Knee-jerks perfect."

"Delighted. Still, I can't charge a man with murder because he calls on his fur model."

"You're so hasty! Why should you charge him with murder?" Vance rose and yawned. "Come, Van. I'd rather like to gaze on Perneb's tomb at the Metropolitan this afternoon. Could you bear it?" At the door he paused. "I say, Markham, what about the Boonton bailiff?"

Markham rang for Swacker.

"I'll see to it at once. Drop in at the club around five, if you feel like it. I'll have the officer there then, as Cleaver is sure to come in before dinner."

When Vance and I returned to the club late that afternoon, Markham was stationed in the lounge-room facing the main door of the rotunda; and beside him sat a tall, heavy-set, bronzed man of about forty, alert but ill at ease.

"Traffic Officer Phipps arrived from Boonton a little while ago," said Markham, by way of introduction. "Cleaver is expected at any moment now. He has an appointment here at half-past five."

Vance drew up a chair.

"I do hope he's a punctual beggar."

"So do I," returned Markham, viciously. "I'm looking forward to your *felo de-se*."

"Our hap is loss, our hope but sad despair," murmured Vance.

Less than ten minutes later Cleaver entered the rotunda from the street, paused at the desk, and sauntered into the lounge-room. There was no escaping the observation point Markham had chosen; and as he walked by us he paused and exchanged greetings. Markham detained him a moment with a few casual questions; and then Cleaver passed on.

"That the man you tickled, officer?" asked Markham, turning to Phipps.

Phipps was scowling perplexedly.

"It looks something like him, sir; there's a kind of resemblance. But it ain't him." He shook his head. "No, sir; it ain't him. The fellow I hung a summons on was stouter than this gent, and wasn't as tall."

"You're positive?"

"Yes, sir—no mistake. The guy I tagged tried to argue with me, and then he tried to slip me a fiver to forget it. I had my headlight on him full."

Phipps was dismissed with a substantial *pourboire*.

"*Vae misero mihi!*" sighed Vance. "My worthless

existence is to be prolonged. Sad. But you must try to bear it . . . I say, Markham, what does Pop Cleaver's brother look like ? "

"That's it," nodded Markham "I've met his brother; he's shorter and stouter. . . . This thing is getting beyond me I think I'll have it out with Cleaver now."

He started to rise, but Vance forced him back into his seat

"Don't be impetuous. Cultivate patience Cleaver's not going to do a bunk; and there are one or two prelimin'ry steps strongly indicated Mannix and Lindquist still seduce my curiosity "

Markham clung to his point

"Neither Mannix nor Lindquist is here now, and Cleaver is. And I want to know why he lied to me about that summons "

"I can tell you that," said Vance "He wanted you to think he was in the wilds of New Jersey at midnight Monday — Simple, what ? "

"The inference is a credit to your intelligence! But I hope you don't seriously think that Cleaver is guilty It's possible he knows something; but I certainly cannot picture him as a strangler "

"And why ? "

"He's not the type It's inconceivable — even if there were evidence against him "

"Ah! The psychological judgment! You eliminate Cleaver because you don't think his nature harmonises with the situation. I say, doesn't that come perilously near being an esoteric hypothesis?—or a metaphysical deduction? . . . However, I don't entirely agree with you in your application of the theory to Cleaver. That fish-eyed gambler has unsuspected potentialities for evil But with the theory itself I am wholly in accord. And behold, my dear Markham; you yourself apply psychology in its abecedarian implications, yet ridicule my application of

it in its higher developments. Consistency may be the hobgoblin of little minds, y' know, but it's none the less a priceless jewel. . . . How about a cup of tea ? ”

We sought the Palm Room, and sat down at a table near the entrance. Vance ordered oolong tea, but Markham and I took black coffee. A very capable four piece orchestra was playing Tchaikovsky's *Casse Noisette* Suite, and we sat restfully in the comfortable chairs without speaking. Markham was tired and dispirited, and Vance was busy with the problem that had absorbed him continuously since Tuesday morning. Never before had I seen him so preoccupied.

We had been there perhaps half an hour when Spotswoode strolled in. He stopped and spoke, and Markham asked him to join us. He, too, appeared depressed, and his eyes showed signs of worry.

“I hardly dare ask you, Mr. Markham,” he said diffidently, after he had ordered a ginger ale, “but how do my chances stand now of being called as a witness ? ”

“That fate is certainly no nearer than when I last saw you,” Markham replied. “In fact, nothing has happened to change the situation materially.”

“And the man you had under suspicion ? ”

“He's still under suspicion, but no arrest has been made. We're hoping, however, that something will break before long.”

“And I suppose you still want me to remain in the city ? ”

“If you can arrange it—yes.”

Spotswoode was silent for a time ; then he said :

“I don't want to appear to shirk any responsibility—and perhaps it may seem wholly selfish for me even to suggest it—but, in any event, wouldn't the testimony of the telephone operator as to the hour of Miss Odell's return and her calls for help be sufficient to establish the facts, without my corroboration ? ”

“I have thought of that, of course ; and if it is at all possible to prepare the case for the prosecution without

summoning you to appear, I assure you it will be done. At the moment, I can see no necessity of your being called as a witness. But one never knows what may turn up. If the defence hinges on a question of exact time, and the operator's testimony is questioned or disqualified for any reason, you may be required to come forward. Otherwise not."

Spotswoode sipped his ginger ale. A little of his depression seemed to have departed.

"You're very generous, Mr. Markham. I wish there was some adequate way of thanking you." He looked up hesitatingly. "I presume you are still opposed to my visiting the apartment. . . . I know you think me unreasonable and perhaps sentimental; but the girl represented something in my life that I find very difficult to tear out. I don't expect you to understand it—I hardly understand it myself."

"I think it's easily understandable, don't y' know," remarked Vance, with a sympathy he had rarely seen him manifest. "Your attitude needs no apology. History and fable are filled with the same situation, and the protagonists have always exhibited sentiments similar to yours. Your most famous prototype, of course, was Odysseus on the citron-scented isle of Ogygia with the fascinatin' Calypso. The soft arms of sirens have gone snaking round men's necks ever since the red-haired Lilith worked her devastatin' wiles on the impressionable Adam. We're all sons of that racy old boy."

Spotswoode smiled.

"You at least give me an historic background," he said. Then he turned to Markham. "What will become of Miss Odell's possessions—her furniture and so forth?"

"Sergeant Heath heard from an aunt of hers in Seattle," Markham told him. "She's on her way to New York, I believe, to take over what there is of the estate."

"And everything will be kept intact until then?"

"Probably longer, unless something unexpected happens. Anyway, until then."

"There ~~are~~ one or two little trinkets I'd like to keep," Spotswoode confessed, a bit shamefacedly, I thought.

After a few more minutes of desultory talk he rose, and, pleading an engagement, bade us good afternoon.

"I hope I can keep his name clear of the case," said Markham, when he had gone.

"Yes; his situation is not an enviable one," concurred Vance. "It's always sad to be found out. The moralist would set it down to retribution."

"In this instance chance was certainly on the side of righteousness. If he hadn't chosen Monday night for the Winter Garden, he might now be in the bosom of his family, with nothing more troublesome to bother him than a guilty conscience."

"It certainly looks that way." Vance glanced at his watch. "And your mention of the Winter Garden reminds me. Do you mind if we dine early? Frivolity beckons me to-night. I'm going to the 'Scandals'."

We both looked at him as though he had taken leave of his senses.

"Don't be so horrified, my Markham. Why should I not indulge an impulse? . . . And, incidentally, I hope to have glad tidings for you by lunch-time to-morrow."

Chapter XVIII

THE TRAP

(Friday, September 14th ; noon)

VANCE slept late the following day. I had accompanied him to the "Scandals" the night before, utterly at a loss to understand his strange desire to attend a type of entertainment which I knew he detested. At noon he ordered his car, and instructed the chauffeur to drive to the Belafield Hotel.

"We are about to call again on the alluring Alys," he said. "I'd bring posies to lay at her shrine, but I fear dear Mannix might question her unduly about them."

Miss La Fosse received us with an air of crestfallen resentment.

"I might've known it!" She nodded her head with sneering perception. "I suppose you've come to tell me the cops found out about me without the slightest assistance from you." Her disdain was almost magnificent. "Did you bring 'em with you? . . . A swell guy *you* are!—But it's my own fault for being a damn fool."

Vance waited unmoved until she had finished her contemptuous tirade. Then he bowed pleasantly.

"Really, y' know, I merely dropped in to pay my respects, and to tell you that the police have turned in their report of Miss Odell's acquaintances, and that your name was not mentioned in it. You seemed a little worried yesterday on that score, and it occurred to me I could set your mind wholly at ease."

The vigilance of her attitude relaxed.

"Is that straight? . . . My God! I don't know what would happen if Louis'd find out I'd been blabbing."

"I'm sure he won't find out, unless you choose to tell him. . . . Won't you be generous and ask me to sit down a moment?"

"Of course—I'm so sorry. I'm just having my coffee. Please join me." She rang for two extra services.

Vance had drunk two cups of coffee less than half an hour before, and I marvelled at his enthusiasm for this atrocious hotel beverage.

"I was a belated spectator of the 'Scandals' last night," he remarked in a negligent, conversational tone. "I missed the *revue* earlier in the season.—How is it you yourself were so late in seeing it?"

"I've been so busy," she confided. "I was rehearsing for 'A Pair of Queens'; but the production's been postponed. Louis couldn't get the theatre he wanted."

"Do you like *revues*?" asked Vance. "I should think they'd be more difficult for the principals than the ordin'ry musical comedy."

"They are." Miss La Fosse adopted a professional air. "And they're unsatisfactory. The individual is lost in them. There's no real scope for one's talent. They're breathless, if you know what I mean."

"I should imagine so." Vance bravely sipped his coffee. "And yet there were several numbers in the 'Scandals' that you could have done charmingly; they seemed particularly designed for you. I thought of you doing them, and—d'ye know?—the thought rather spoiled my enjoyment of the young lady who appeared in them."

"You flatter me, Mr. Vance. But, really, I have a good voice. I've studied very hard. And I learned dancing with Professor Markoff."

"Indeed!" (I'm sure Vance had never heard the name before, but his exclamation seemed to imply that he regarded Professor Markoff as one of the world's most renowned

ballet-masters.) "Then you certainly should have been starred in the 'Scandals.' The young lady I have in mind sang rather indifferently, and her dancing was most inadequate. Moreover, she was many degrees your inferior in personality and attractiveness . . . Confess: didn't you have just a little desire last Monday night to be singing the 'Chinese Lullaby' song?"

"Oh, I don't know." Miss La Fosse carefully considered the suggestion. "They kept the lights awfully low; and I don't look so well in cerise. But the costumes were adorable, weren't they?"

"On you they certainly would have been adorable. . . . What colour are you partial to?"

"I love the orchid shades," she told him enthusiastically; "though I don't look at all bad in turquoise blue. But an artist once told me I should always wear white. He wanted to paint my portrait, but the gentleman I was engaged to then didn't like him."

Vance regarded her appraisingly.

"I think your artist friend was right. And, y' know, the St. Moritz scene in the 'Scandals' would have suited you perfectly. The little brunette who sang the snow song, all in white, was delightful; but really, now, she should have had golden hair. Dusky beauties belong to the southern climes. And she impressed me as lacking the sparkle and vitality of a Swiss resort in midwinter. You could have supplied those qualities admirably."

"Yes; I'd have liked that better than the Chinese number, I think. White fox is my favourite fur, too. But, even so, in a *revue* you're on in one number and off in another. When it's all over, you're forgotten." She sighed unhappily.

Vance set down his cup, and looked at her with whimsically reproachful eyes. After a moment he said

"My dear, why did you fib to me about the time Mr. Mannix returned to you last Monday night? It wasn't a bit nice of you."

"What do you mean!" Miss La Fosse exclaimed in frightened indignation, drawing herself up into an attitude of withering hauteur.

"You see," explained Vance, "the St. Moritz scene of the 'Scandals' doesn't go on until nearly eleven, and it closes the bill. So you couldn't possibly have seen it and also received Mr. Mannix here at half-past ten.—Come. What time did he arrive here Monday night?"

The girl flushed angrily.

"You're pretty slick, aren't you? You should've been a cop. . . Well, what if I didn't get home till after the show? Any crime in that?"

"None whatever," answered Vance mildly. "Only a little breach of good faith in telling me you came home early." He bent forward earnestly. "I'm not here to make you trouble. On the contrary, I'd like to protect you from any distress or bother. You see, if the police go nosing round, they may run on to you. But if I'm able to give the District Attorney accurate information about certain things connected with Monday night, there'll be no danger of the police being sent to look for you."

Miss La Fosse's eyes grew suddenly hard and her brow crinkled with determination.

"Listen! I haven't got anything to hide, and neither has Louis. But if Louis asks me to say he's somewhere at half past ten, I'm going to say it—see? That's my idea of friendship. Louis had some good reason to ask it, too, or he wouldn't have done it. However, since you're so smart, and have accused me of playing unfair, I'm going to tell you that he didn't get in till after midnight. But if anybody else asks me about it, I'll see 'em in hell before I tell 'em anything but the half past ten story. Get that?"

Vance bowed.

"I get it; and I like you for it."

"But don't go away with the wrong idea," she hurried on, her eyes sparkling with fervour. "Louis may not have

got here till after midnight, but if you think he knows anything about Margy's death, you're crazy. He was through with Margy a year ago. Why, he hardly knew she was on earth. And if any fool cop gets the notion in his head that Louis was mixed up in the affair, I'll alibi him--so help me God!--if it's the last thing I do in this world."

"I like you more and more," said Vance; and when she gave him her hand at parting he lifted it to his lips.

As we rode down town Vance was thoughtful. We were nearly to the Criminal Courts Building before he spoke.

"The primitive Alys rather appeals to me," he said. "She's much too good for the oleaginous Mannix. . . . Women are so shrewd--and so gullible. A woman can read a man with almost magical insight; but, on the other hand, she is inexpressibly blind when it comes to *her* man. Witness sweet Alys's faith in Mannix. He probably told her he was slaving at the office Monday night. Naturally, she doesn't believe it; but she knows *knows*, mind you that her Louis just couldn't have been concerned in the Canary's death. Ah, well, let us hope she's right and that Mannix is not apprehended--at least not until her new show is financed. . . . My word! If this being a detective involves many more *revues*, I shall have to resign. Thank Heaven, though, the lady didn't attend the cinema Monday night!"

When we arrived at the District Attorney's office we found Heath and Markham in consultation. Markham had a pad before him, several pages of which were covered with tabulated and annotated entries. A cloud of cigar-smoke enveloped him. Heath sat facing him, his elbows on the table, his chin resting in his hands. He looked pugnacious but disconsolate.

"I'm going over the case with the Sergeant," Markham explained, with a brief glance in our direction. "We're trying to get all the salient points down in some kind of order, to see if there are any connecting links we've overlooked. I've told the Sergeant about the doctor's infatua-

tion and his threats, and of the failure of Traffic Officer Phipps to identify Cleaver. But the more we learn, the worse, apparently, the jumble grows."

He picked up the sheets of paper and fastened them together with a clip.

"The truth is, we haven't any real evidence against anybody. There are suspicious circumstances connected with Skeel and Doctor Lindquist and Cleaver; and our interview with Mannix didn't precisely allay suspicions in his direction, either. But when we come right down to it, what's the situation?—We've got some finger-prints of Skeel, which might have been made late Monday afternoon.—Doctor Lindquist goes berserk when we ask him where he was Monday night, and then offers us a weak alibi. He admits a fatherly interest in the girl, whereas he's really in love with her—a perfectly natural bit of mendacity. —Cleaver lent his car to his brother and lied about it, so that I'd think he was in Boonton Monday at midnight —And Mannix gives us a number of shifty answers to our questions concerning his relations with the girl. . . . Not an embarrassment of riches."

"I wouldn't say your information was exactly negligent," observed Vance, taking a chair beside the Sergeant. "It may all prove devilish valuable if only it could be put together properly. The difficulty, it appears to me, is that certain parts of the puzzle are missing. Find 'em, and I'll warrant everything will fit beautifully like a mosaic."

"Easy enough, to say 'find 'em,'" grumbled Markham. "The trouble is to know where to look."

Heath relighted his dead cigar and made an impatient gesture.

"You can't get away from Skeel. He's the boy that did it, and, if it wasn't for Abe Rubin, I'd sweat the truth out of him.—And by the way, Mr. Vance, he had his own private key to the Odell apartment, all right." He glanced at Markham hesitatingly. "I don't want to look as if I was

criticising, sir, but I got a feeling we're wasting time chasing after these gentlemen friends of Odell—Cleaver and Mannix and this here doctor."

"You may be right." Markham seemed inclined to agree with him. "However, I'd like to know why Lindquist acted the way he did."

"Well, that might help some," Heath compromised. "If the doc was so far gone on Odell as to threaten to shoot her, and if he went off his head when you asked him to alibi himself, maybe he could tell us something. Why not throw a little scare into him? His record ain't any too good, anyway."

"An excellent idea," chimed in Vance.

Markham looked up sharply. Then he consulted his appointment book.

"I'm fairly free this afternoon, so suppose you bring him down here, Sergeant. Get a subpoena if you have to—only see that he comes. And make it as soon after lunch as you can." He tapped on the desk irritably. "If I don't do anything else, I'm going to eliminate some of this human flotsam that's cluttering up the case. And Lindquist is as good as any to start with. I'll either develop these various suspicious circumstances into something workable, or I'll root them up. Then we'll see where we stand."

Heath shook hands pessimistically and went out.

"Poor hapless man!" sighed Vance, looking after him. "He giveth way to all the pangs and fury of despair."

"And so would you," snapped Markham, "if the newspapers were butchering you for a political holiday.—By the way, weren't you to be a harbinger of glad tidings this noon, or something of the sort?"

"I believe I did hold out some such hope." Vance sat looking meditatively out of the window for several minutes. "Markham, this fellow Mannix lures me like a magnet. He irks and whirrets me. He infests my slumbers. He's the raven on my bust of Pallas. He plagues me like a banshee."

"Does this jeremiad come under the head of tidings?"

"I sha'n't rest peacefully," pursued Vance, "until I know where Louis the furrier was between eleven o'clock and midnight Monday. He was somewhere he shouldn't have been. And you, Markham, must find out. Please make Mannix the second offensive in your assault upon the flotsam. He'll parley, with the right amount of pressure. Be brutal, old dear; let him think you suspect him of the throttling. Ask him about the fur model—what's her name?—Frisbee—" He stopped short and knit his brows. "My eye—oh my eye! I wonder. . . . Yes, yes, Markham; you must question him about the fur model. Ask him where he saw her last; and try to look wise and mysterious when you're doing it"

"See here, Vance"—Markham was exasperated—"you've been harping on Mannix for three days. What's keeping your nose to that scent?"

"Intuition—sheer intuition. My psychic temperament, don't y' know."

"I'd believe that if I hadn't known you for fifteen years" Markham inspected him shrewdly; then shrugged his shoulders "I'll have Mannix on the tapis when I'm through with Lindquist."

Chapter XIX

THE DOCTOR EXPLAINS

(Friday, September 14th ; 2 p.m.)

We lunched in the District Attorney's private sanctum ; and at two o'clock Doctor Lindquist was announced. Heath accompanied him, and, from the expression on the Sergeant's face, it was plain he did not at all like his companion.

The doctor, at Markham's request, seated himself facing the District Attorney's desk.

"What is the meaning of this new outrage?" he demanded coldly. "Is it your prerogative to force a citizen to leave his private affairs in order to be bullied?"

"It's my duty to bring murderers to justice," replied Markham, with equal coldness. "And if any citizen considers that giving aid to the authorities is an outrage, that's his prerogative. If you have anything to fear by answering my questions doctor, you are entitled to have your attorney present. Would you care to phone him to come here now and give you legal protection?"

Doctor Lindquist hesitated. "I need no legal protection, sir. Will you be good enough to tell me at once why I was brought here?"

"Certainly; to explain a few points which have been discovered regarding your relationship with Miss Odell, and to elucidate—if you care to—your reasons for deceiving me, at our last conference, in regard to that relationship."

"You have, I infer, been prying unwarrantably into my private affairs. I had heard that such practices were once common in Russia. . . ."

"If the prying was unwarranted, you can, Doctor Lindquist, easily convince me on that point; and whatever we may have learned concerning you will be instantly forgotten.—It is true, is it not, that your interest in Miss Odell went somewhat beyond mere paternal affection?"

"Are not even a man's sacred sentiments respected by the police of this country?" There was insolent scorn in the doctor's tone.

"Under some conditions, yes; under others, no." Markham controlled his fury admirably. "You need not answer me, of course; but, if you choose to be frank, you may possibly save yourself the humiliation of being questioned publicly by the People's attorney in a court of law."

Doctor Lindquist winced and considered the matter at some length.

"And if I admit that my affection for Miss Odell was other than paternal—what then?"

Markham accepted the question as an affirmation.

"You were intensely jealous of her, were you not, doctor?"

"Jealousy," Doctor Lindquist remarked, with an air of ironic professionalism, "is not an unusual accompaniment to an infatuation. Authorities such as Krafft-Ebing, Moll, Freud, Ferenczi, and Adler, I believe, regard it as an intimate psychological corollary of amatory attraction."

"Most instructive," Markham nodded his head appreciatively. "I am to assume, then, that you were infatuated with—or, let us say, amorily attracted by—Miss Odell, and that on occasions you exhibited the intimate psychological corollary of jealousy?"

"You may assume what you please. But I fail to understand why my emotions are any of your affair."

"Had your emotions not led you to highly questionable and suspicious acts, I would not be interested in them. But I have it on unimpeachable authority that your emotions so reacted on your better judgment that you threatened to

take Miss Odell's life and also your own. And, in view of the fact that the young woman has since been murdered, the law naturally—and reasonably—is curious."

The doctor's normally pale face seemed to turn yellow, and his long splay fingers tightened over the arms of his chair; but otherwise he sat immobile and rigidly dignified, his eyes fixed intently on the District Attorney.

"I trust," added Markham, "you will not augment my suspicions by any attempt at denial."

Vance was watching the man closely. Presently he leaned forward.

"I say, doctor, what method of extermination did you threaten Miss Odell with?"

Doctor Lindquist jerked round, thrusting his head toward Vance. He drew in a long rasping breath, and his whole frame became tense. Blood suffused his cheeks; and there was a twitching of the muscles about his mouth and throat. For a moment I was afraid he was going to lose his self-control. But after a moment's effort he steadied himself.

"You think perhaps I threatened to strangle her?" His words were vibrant with the intensity of his passionate anger. "And you would like to turn my threat into a noose to hang me?—Paugh!" He paused, and when he spoke again his voice had become calmer. "It is quite true I once inadvisedly attempted to frighten Miss Odell with a threat to kill her and to commit suicide. But if your information is as accurate as you would have me believe, you are aware that I threatened her with a revolver. It is the weapon, I believe, that is conventionally mentioned when making empty threats. I certainly would not have threatened her with thuggee, even had I contemplated so abominable an act."

"True," nodded Vance. "And it's a rather good point, don't y' know."

The doctor was evidently encouraged by Vance's attitude. He again faced Markham and elaborated his confession.

"A threat, I presume you know, is rarely the forerunner of a violent deed. Even a brief study of the human mind would teach you that a threat is *prima facie* evidence of one's innocence. A threat, generally, is made in anger, and acts as its own safety valve." He shifted his eyes. "I am not a married man; my emotional life has not been stabilised, as it were; and I am constantly coming in close contact with hypersensitive and overwrought people. During a period of abnormal susceptibility I conceived an infatuation for the young woman, an infatuation which she did not reciprocate—certainly not with an ardour commensurate with my own. I suffered deeply; and she made no effort to mitigate my sufferings. Indeed, I suspected her, more than once, of deliberately and perversely torturing me with other men. At any rate, she took no pains to hide her infidelities from me. I confess that once or twice I was almost distracted. And it was in the hope of frightening her into a more amenable and considerate attitude that I threatened her.—I trust that you are a sufficiently discerning judge of human nature to believe me."

"Leaving that point for a moment," answered Markham non-committedly, "will you give me more specific information as to your whereabouts Monday night?"

Again I noted a yellow tinge creep over the man's features, and his body stiffened perceptibly. But when he spoke it was with his habitual suavity.

"I considered that my note to you covered that question satisfactorily. What did I omit?"

"What was the name of the patient on whom you were calling that night?"

"Mrs. Anna Breedon. She is the widow of the late Amos H. Breedon of the Breedon National Bank of Long Branch."

"And you were with her, I believe you stated, from eleven until one?"

"That is correct."

"And was Mrs. Breedon the only witness to your presence at the sanatorium between those hours?"

"I am afraid that is so. You see, after ten o'clock at night I never ring the bell. I let myself in with my own key."

"And I suppose that I may be permitted to question Mrs. Breedon?"

Doctor Lindquist was profoundly regretful.

"Mrs. Breedon is a very ill woman. She suffered a tremendous shock at the time of her husband's death last summer, and has been practically in a semi-conscious condition ever since. There are times when I even fear for her reason. The slightest disturbance or excitement might produce very serious results."

He took a newspaper cutting from a gold-edged letter-case and handed it to Markham.

"You will observe that this obituary notice mentions her prostration and confinement in a private sanatorium. I have been her physician for years."

Markham, after glancing at the cutting, handed it back. There was a short silence broken by a question from Vance.

"By the by, doctor, what is the name of the night nurse at your sanatorium?"

Doctor Lindquist looked up quickly.

"My night nurse? Why—what has she to do with it? She was very busy Monday night. I can't understand. . . . Well, if you want her name I have no objection. It's Finckle—Miss Amelia Finckle."

Vance wrote down the name and, rising, carried the slip of paper to Heath.

"Sergeant, bring Miss Finckle here to-morrow morning at eleven," he said, with a slight lowering of one eyelid.

"I surewill, sir. Good idea." His manner boded no good for Miss Finckle.

A cloud of apprehension spread over Doctor Lindquist's face.

"Forgive me if I say that I am insensible to the sanity of your cavalier methods." His tone betrayed only contempt. "May I hope that for the present your inquisition is ended?"

"I think that will be all, doctor," returned Markham politely. "May I have a taxicab called for you?"

"Your consideration overwhelms me. But my car is below." And Doctor Lindquist haughtily withdrew.

Markham immediately summoned Swacker and sent him for Tracy. The detective came at once, polishing his *pince-nez* and bowing affably. One would have taken him for an actor rather than a detective, but his ability in matters requiring delicate handling was a byword in the department.

"I want you to fetch Mr. Louis Mannix again," Markham told him. "Bring him here at once; I'm waiting to see him."

Tracy bowed genially and, adjusting his glasses, departed on his errand.

"And now," said Markham, fixing Vance with a reproachful look, "I want to know what your idea was in putting Lindquist on his guard about the night nurse. Your brain isn't at par this afternoon. Do you think I didn't have the nurse in mind? And now you've warned him. He'll have until eleven to-morrow morning to coach her in her answers. Really Vance, I can't conceive of anything better calculated to defeat us in our attempt to substantiate the man's alibi."

"I did put a little fright into him, didn't I?" Vance grinned complacently. "Whenever your antagonist begins talking exaggeratedly about the insanity of your notions, he's already deuced hot under the collar. But, Markham old thing, don't burst into tears over my mental shortcomings. If you and I both thought of the nurse, don't you suppose the wily doctor also thought of her? If this Miss Finckle were the type that could be suborned, he would have enlisted her perjurious services two days ago, and she would have been mentioned, along with the comatose Mrs.

Breedon, as a witness to his presence at the sanitorium Monday night. The fact that he avoided all reference to the nurse shows that she's not to be wheedled into swearing falsely. . . . No, Markham, I deliberately put him on his guard. Now he'll have to do something before we question Miss Finckle. And I'm vain enough to think I know what it'll be."

"Let me get this right," put in Heath. "Am I, or am I not, to round up the Finckle woman to-morrow morning?"

"There'll be no need," said Vance. "We are doomed, I fear, not to gaze upon this Florence Nightingale. A meeting between us is about the last thing the doctor would desire."

"That may be true," admitted Markham. "But don't forget that he may have been up to something Monday night wholly unconnected with the murder, that he simply doesn't want known."

"Quite—quite. And yet, nearly every one who knew the Canary seemed to have selected Monday night for the indulgence of *sub-rosa* peccadilloes. It's a bit thick, what? Skeel tries to make us believe he was immersed in Khun Khan. Cleaver was—if you take his word for it—touring the countryside in Jersey's lake district. Lindquist wants us to picture him as comforting the afflicted. And Mannix, I happen to know, has gone to some trouble to build up an alibi in case we get nosey. All of 'em, in fact, were doing something they don't want us to know about. Now, what was it? And why did they, of one accord, select the night of the murder for mysterious affairs which they don't dare mention, even to clear themselves of suspicion? Was there an invasion of efreetts in the city that night? Was there a curse on the world, driving men to dark bawdy deeds? Was there Black Magic abroad? I think not."

"I'm laying my money on Skeel," declared Heath stubbornly. "I know a professional job when I see it. And you can't get away from those finger-prints and the Professor's report on the chisel."

Markham was sorely perplexed. His belief in Skeel's guilt had, I knew, been undermined in some measure by Vance's theory that the crime was the carefully premeditated act of a shrewd and educated man. But now he seemed to swing irresolutely back to Heath's point of view.

"I'll admit," he said, "that Lindquist and Cleaver and Mannix don't inspire one with a belief in their innocence. But since they're all tarred with the same stick, the force of suspicion against them is somewhat dispersed. After all, Skeel is the only logical aspirant for the rôle of strangler. He's the only one with a visible motive; and he's the only one against whom there's any evidence."

Vance sighed wearily.

"Yes, yes. Finger-prints—chisel marks. You're such a trustin' soul, Markham. Skeel's finger-prints are found in the apartment; therefore, Skeel strangled the lady. So beastly simple. Why bother further? A *chose jugée*—an adjudicated case. Send Skeel to the chair, and that's that! . . . It's effective, y' know, but is it art?"

"In your critical enthusiasm you understate our case against Skeel," Markham reminded him testily.

"Oh, I'll grant that your case against him is ingenious. It's so deuced ingenious I just haven't the heart to reject it. But most popular truth is mere ingenuity—that's why it's so wrong headed. Your theory would appeal strongly to the popular mind. And yet, y' know, Markham, it isn't true."

The practical Heath was unmoved. He sat stolidly, scowling at the table. I doubt if he had even heard the exchange of opinions between Markham and Vance.

"You know, Mr. Markham," he said, like one unconsciously voicing an obscure line of thought, "if we could show how Skeel got in and out of Odell's apartment we'd have a better case against him. I can't figure it out—it's got me stopped. So, I've been thinking we ought to get an architect to go over those rooms. The house is an old-timer

—God knows when it was originally built—and there may be some way of getting into it that we haven't discovered yet."

"'Pon my soul!" Vance stared at him in satirical wonderment. "You're becoming downright romantic! Secret passageways—hidden doors—stairways between the walls. So that's it, is it? Oh, my word! . . . Sergeant, beware of the cinema. It has ruined many a good man. Try grand opera for a while—it's more borin' but less corruptin'."

"That's all right, Mr. Vance." Apparently Heath himself did not relish the architectural idea particularly. "But as long as we don't know how Skeel got in, it's just as well to make sure of a few ways he didn't get in."

"I agree with you, Sergeant," said Markham. "I'll get an architect on the job at once." He rang for Swacker, and gave the necessary instructions.

Vance extended his legs and yawned.

"All we need now is a Favourite of the Harem, a few blackamoors with palm-leaf fans, and some *pizzicato* music."

"You will joke, Mr. Vance." Heath lit a fresh cigar. "But even if the architect don't find anything wrong with the apartment, Skeel's liable to give his hand away 'most any time."

"I'm pinnin' my child'sh faith on Mannix," said Vance. "I don't know why I should; but he's not a nice man, and he's suppressing something—Markham, don't you dare let him go until he tells you where he was Monday night. And don't forget to hint mysteriously about the tire model."

Chapter XX

A MIDNIGHT WITNESS

(Friday, September 14th; 3.30 p m.)

IN less than half-an-hour Mannix arrived. Heath relinquished his seat to the newcomer, and moved to a large chair beneath the windows. Vance had taken a place at the small table on Markham's right where he was able to face Mannix obliquely.

It was patent that Mannix did not relish the idea of another interview. His little eyes slitted quickly about the office, lingered suspiciously for a moment on Heath, and at last came to rest on the District Attorney. He was more vigilant even than during his first visit; and his greeting to Markham, while fulsome, had in it a note of trepidation. Nor was Markham's air calculated to put him at ease. It was an ominous, indomitable Public Prosecutor who motioned him to be seated. Mannix laid his hat and cane on the table, and sat down on the edge of his chair, his back as perpendicular as a flag-pole.

"I'm not at all satisfied with what you told me Wednesday, Mr. Mannix," Markham began, "and I trust you won't necessitate me to take drastic steps to find out what you know about Miss Odell's death."

"What I know!" Mannix forced a smile intended to be disarming. "Mr. Markham—Mr. Markham!" He seemed oilier than usual as he spread his hands in hopeless appeal. "If I knew anything, believe me, I would tell you—positively I would tell you."

"I'm delighted to hear it. Your willingness makes my task easier. First, then, please tell me where you were at midnight Monday."

Mannix's eyes slowly contracted until they looked like two tiny shining discs, but otherwise the man did not move. After what seemed an interminable pause, he spoke.

"I should tell you where I was Monday? Why should I have to do that? . . . Maybe I'm suspected of the murder—yes?"

"You're not suspected now. But your apparent unwillingness to answer my question is certainly suspicious. Why don't you care to have me know where you were?"

"I got no reason to keep it from you, y' understand." Mannix shrugged. "I got nothing to be ashamed of—absolutely! . . . I had a lot of accounts to go over at the office—winter-season stocks. I was down at the office until ten o'clock—maybe later. Then at half past ten—"

"That'll do!" Vance's voice cut in tartly. "No need to drag anyone else into this thing."

He spoke with a curious significance of emphasis, and Mannix studied him craftily, trying to read what knowledge, if any, lay behind his words. But he received no enlightenment from Vance's features. The warning, however, had been enough to halt him.

"You don't want to know where I was at half past ten?"

"Not particularly," said Vance. "We want to know where you were at midnight. And it won't be necessary to mention anyone who's with you at that time. When you tell us the truth, we'll know it." He himself had assumed the air of wisdom and mystery that he had deputed to Markham earlier in the afternoon. Without breaking faith with Alyo La Losse, he had sown the seeds of doubt in Mannix's mind.

Before the man could frame an answer, Vance stood up and leaned impressively over the District Attorney's desk.

"You know a Miss Lrisbee. Lives in 71st Street, accu-

rately speaking—at number 184; to be more exact—in the house where Miss Odell lived; to put it precisely—in Apartment Number 2. Miss Frisbee was a former model of yours. Sociable girl: still charitable to the advances of her erstwhile employer—meanin' yourself.—When did you see her last, Mr. Mannix? . . . Take your time about answering. You may want to think it over."

Mannix took his time. It was a full minute before he spoke, and then it was to put another question.

"Haven't I got a right to call on a lady—haven't I?"

"Certainly. Therefore, why should a question about so obviously correct and irreproachable an episode make you uneasy?"

"Me uneasy?" Mannix, with considerable effort, produced a grin. "I'm just wondering what you got in your mind, asking me about my private affairs"

"I'll tell you. Miss Odell was murdered at about midnight Monday. No one came or went through the front door of the house, and the side door was locked. The only way anyone could have entered her apartment was by way of Apartment 2; and nobody who knew Miss Odell ever visited Apartment 2 except yourself"

At these words Mannix leaned over the table, grasping the edge of it with both hands for support. His eyes were wide and his sensual lips hung open. But it was not fear that one read in his attitude; it was sheer amazement. He sat for a moment staring at Vance, stunned and incredulous.

"That's what you think, is it? No one could've got in or out except by Apartment 2, because the side door was locked?" He gave a short vicious laugh. "If that side door didn't happen to be locked Monday night, where'd I stand then—huh? Where'd I stand?"

"I rather think you'd stand with us—with the District Attorney." Vance was watching him like a cat.

"Sure I would!" spat Mannix. "And let me tell you

something, my friend: that's just where I stand—absolutely!" He swung heavily about and faced Markham. "I'm a good fellow, y' understand, but I've kept my mouth shut long enough. . . . *That side door wasn't locked Monday night. And I know who sneaked out of it at five minutes to twelve!*"

"*Ca marche!*" murmured Vance, reseating himself and calmly lighting a cigarette.

Markham was too astonished to speak at once; and Heath stood stock-still, his cigar half-way to his mouth.

At length Markham leaned back and folded his arms

"I think you'd better tell us the whole story, Mr. Mannix." His voice held a quality which made the request an imperative.

Mannix, too, settled back in his chair.

"Oh, I'm going to tell it—believe me, I'm going to tell it.—You had the right idea. I spent the evening with Miss Frisbee. No harm in that, though."

"What time did you go there?"

"After office hours—halfpast five, quarter to six. Came up in the subway, got off at 72d, and walked over."

"And you entered the house through the front door?"

"No. I walked down the alleyway and went in the side door—like I generally do. It's nobody's business who I call on, and what the telephone operator in the front hall don't know don't hurt him."

"That's all right so far," observed Heath. "The janitor didn't bolt the side door until after six."

"And did you stay the entire evening, Mr. Mannix?" asked Markham.

"Sure—till just before midnight. Miss Frisbee cooked the dinner, and I'd brought along a bottle of wine. Social little party—just the two of us. And I didn't go outside the apartment, understand, until five minutes to twelve. You can get the lady down here and ask her. I'll call her up now and tell her to explain the exact situation about

Monday night. I'm not asking you to take my word for it—positively not.”

Markham made a gesture dismissing the suggestion.

“What took place at five minutes to twelve?”

Mannix hesitated, as if loath to come to the point.

“I'm a good fellow, y' understand. And a friend's a friend. But—I ask you—is that any reason why I should get in wrong for something I didn't have absolutely nothing to do with?”

He waited for an answer, but receiving none, continued.

“Sure, I'm right.—Anyway, here's what happened. As I said, I was calling on the lady. But I had another date for later that night; so a few minutes before midnight I said good-bye and started to go. Just as I opened the door I saw someone sneaking away from the Canary's apartment, down the little back hall to the side door. There was a light in the hall, and the door of Apartment 2 faces that side door. I saw the fellow as plain as I see you—positively as plain.”

“Who was it?”

“Well, if you got to know, it was Pop Cleaver.”

Markham's head jerked slightly.

“What did you do then?”

“Nothing, Mr. Markham—nothing at all. I didn't think much about it, y' understand. I knew Pop was chasing after the Canary, and I just supposed he'd been calling on her. But I didn't want Pop to see me—none of his business where I spend my time. So I waited quietly t'il he went out——”

“By the side door?”

“Sure.—Then I went out the same way I was going to leave by the front door, because I knew the side door was always locked at night. But when I saw Pop go out that way, I said to myself I'd do the same. No sense giving your business away to a telephone operator if you haven't got to—no sense at all. So I went out the same way I came in. Picked up a taxi on Broadway, and went——”

"That's enough!" Again Vance's command cut him short.

"Oh, all right—all right." Mannix seemed content to end his statement at this point. "Only, y' understand, I don't want you to think——"

"We don't."

Markham was puzzled at these interruptions, but made no comment.

"When you read of Miss Odell's death," he said, "why didn't you come to the police with this highly important information?"

"I should get mixed up with it!" exclaimed Mannix in surprise. "I got enough trouble without looking for it—plenty."

"An exigent course," commented Markham with open disgust. "But you nevertheless suggested to me, after you knew of the murder, that Cleaver was being blackmailed by Miss Odell."

"Sure I did. Don't that go to show I wanted to do the right thing by you—giving you a valuable tip?"

"Did you see anyone else that night in the halls or alleyway?"

"Nobody—absolutely nobody."

"Did you hear anyone in the Odell apartment—anyone speaking or moving about, perhaps?"

"Didn't hear a thing." Mannix shook his head emphatically.

"And you're certain of the time you saw Cleaver go out—five minutes to twelve?"

"Positively. I looked at my watch, and I said to the lady: 'I'm leaving the same day I came; it won't be to-morrow for five minutes yet.'"

Markham went over his story point by point, attempting by various means to make him admit more than he had already told. But Mannix neither added to his statement nor modified it in any detail; and after half-an-hour's cross-examination he was permitted to go.

"We've found one missing piece of the puzzle, at any rate," commented Vance. "I don't see now just how it fits in with the complete pattern, but it's helpful and suggestive. And, I say, how beautifully my intuition about Mannix was verified, don't y' know!"

"Yes, of course—your precious intuition" Markham looked at him sceptically. "Why did you shut him up twice when he was trying to tell me something?"

"O, *tu ne sauras jamais*," recited Vance. "I simply can't tell you, old dear. Awfully sorry, and all that."

His manner was whimsical, but Markham knew that at such times Vance was at heart most serious, and he did not press the question. I could not help wondering if Miss La Fosse realised just how secure she had been in putting her faith in Vance's integrity.

Heath had been considerably shaken by Mannix's story.

"I don't savvy that side door being unlocked," he complained. "How the hell did it get bolted again on the inside after Mannix went out? And who unbolted it after six o'clock?"

"In God's good time, my Sergeant, all things will be revealed," said Vance.

"Maybe—and maybe not. But if we do find out, you can take it from me that the answer'll be Skeel. He's the bird we got to get the goods on. Cleaver is no expert jimmy artist; and neither is Mannix."

"Just the same, there was a very capable technician on hand that night, and it wasn't your friend the Dude—though he was probably the Donatello who sculptured open the jewel case."

"A pair or 'em was there? That's your theory, is it, Mr. Vance? You said that once before; and I'm not saying you're wrong. But if we can hang any part of it on Skeel, we'll make him come across as to who his pal was."

"It wasn't a pal, Sergeant. It was more likely a stranger."

Markham sat glowering into space.

"I don't at all like the Cleaver end of this affair," he said. "There's been something damned wrong about him ever since Monday."

"And I say," put in Vance, "doesn't the gentleman's false alibi take on a certain shady significance now, what? You apprehend, I trust, why I restrained you from questioning him about it at the club yesterday. I rather fancied that if you could get Mannix to pour out his heart to you, you'd be in a stronger position to draw a few admissions from Cleaver. And behold! Again the triumph of intuition! With what you now know about him, you can chivy him most unconscionably—eh, what?"

"And that's precisely what I'm going to do" Markham rang for Swacker. "Get hold of Charles Cleaver," he ordered irritably. "'Phone him at the Stuyvesant Club and also his home—he lives round the corner from the club in West 27th Street. And tell him I want him to be here in half an hour, or I'll send a couple of detectives to bring him in handcuffs."

For five minutes Markham stood before the window, smoking agitatedly, while Vance, with a smile of amusement, busied himself with *The Wall Street Journal*. Heath got himself a drink of water, and took a turn up and down the room. Presently Swacker re-entered.

"Sorry, Chief, but there's nothing doing. Cleaver's gone into the country somewhere. Won't be back till late to-night."

"Hell! . . . All right—that'll do. Markham turned to Heath. "You have Cleaver rounded up to-night, Sergeant, and bring him in here to-morrow morning at nine."

"He'll be here, sir!" Heath paused in his pacing and faced Markham. "I've been thinking, sir; and there's one thing that keeps coming up in my mind, so to speak. You remember that black document-box that was laying on the living-room table? It was empty, and what a

woman generally keeps in that kind of a box is letters and things like that. Well, now, here's what's been bothering me: that box wasn't jimmied open—it was unlocked with a key. And, anyway, a professional crook don't take letters and documents. . . . You see what I mean, sir?"

"Sergeant of mine!" exclaimed Vance. "I abase myself before you! I sit at your feet! . . . 'The document-box—the tidily opened, empty document-box! Of course! Skeel didn't open it—never in this world! That was the other chap's handiwork."

"What was in your mind about that box, Sergeant?" asked Markham.

"Just this, sir. As Mr. Vance has insisted right along, there might've been someone besides Skeel in that apartment during the night. And you told me that Cleaver admitted to you he'd paid Odell a lot of money last June to get back his letters. But suppose he never paid that money; suppose he went there Monday night and took those letters. Wouldn't he have told you just the story he did about buying 'em back? Maybe that's how Mannix happened to see him there."

"That's not unreasonable," Markham acknowledged. "But where does it lead us?"

"Well, sir, if Cleaver did take 'em Monday night, he might've held on to 'em. And if any of those letters were dated later than last June, when he says he bought 'em back, then we'd have the goods on him."

"Well?"

"As I say, sir, I've been thinking. . . . Now, Cleaver is out of town to day; and if we could get hold of those letters. . . ."

"It might prove helpful, of course," said Markham coolly, looking the Sergeant straight in the eye. "But such a thing is quite out of the question."

"Still and all," mumbled Heath, "Cleaver's been pulling a lot of raw stuff on you, sir."

Chapter XXI

A CONTRADICTION IN DATES

(Saturday, September 15th; 9 a.m.)

THE next morning Markham and Vince and I breakfasted together at the Prince George, and arrived at the District Attorney's office a few minutes past nine. Heath, with Cleaver in tow, was waiting in the reception-room.

To judge by Cleaver's manner as he entered, the Sergeant had been none too considerate of him. He strode belligerently to the District Attorney's desk and fixed a cold, resentful eye on Markham.

"Am I, by any chance, under arrest?" he demanded softly, but it was the rasping, suppressed softness of wrathful indignation.

"Not yet," said Markham curtly. "But if you were, you'd only have yourself to blame—Sit down."

Cleaver hesitated, and took the nearest chair.

"Why was I routed out of bed at seven-thirty by this detective of yours?"—he jerked his thumb toward Heath—"and threatened with patrol-wagons and warrants because I objected to such high-handed and illegal methods?"

"You were merely threatened with legal procedure if you refused to accept my invitation voluntarily. This is my short day at the office; and there was some explaining I wanted from you without delay."

"I'm damned if I'll explain anything to you under these conditions!" For all his nerveless poise, Cleaver was finding it difficult to control himself. "I'm no pickpocket that you

can drag in here when it suits your convenience and put through a third degree."

"That's eminently satisfactory to me." Markham spoke ominously. "But since you refuse to do your explaining as a free citizen, I have no other course than to alter your present status." He turned to Heath. "Sergeant, go across the hall and have Ben swear out a warrant for Charles Cleaver. Then lock this gentleman up."

Cleaver gave a start, and caught his breath sibilantly.

"On what charge?" he demanded.

"The murder of Margaret Odell."

The man sprang to his feet. The colour had gone from his face, and the muscles of his jowls worked spasmodically.

"Wait! You're giving me a raw deal. And you'll lose out, too. You couldn't make that charge stick in a thousand years."

"Maybe not. But if you don't want to talk here, I'll make you talk in court."

"I'll talk here" Cleaver sat down again. "What do you want to know?"

Markham took out a cigar and lit it with deliberation.

"First: why did you tell me you were in Boonton Monday night?"

Cleaver apparently had expected the question.

"When I read of the Canary's death I wanted an alibi; and my brother had just given me the summons he'd been handed in Boonton. It was a ready-made alibi right in my hand. So I used it."

"Why did you need an alibi?"

"I didn't need it; but I thought it might save me trouble. People knew I'd been running round with the Odell girl; and some of them knew she'd been blackmailing me—I'd told 'em, like a damn fool. I told Mannix, for instance. We'd both been stung."

"Is that your only reason for concocting this alibi?" Markham was watching him sharply.

"Wasn't it reason enough? Blackmail would have constituted a motive, wouldn't it?"

"It takes more than a motive to arouse unpleasant suspicion."

"Maybe so. Only I didn't want to be drawn into it.—You can't blame me for trying to keep clear of it."

Markham leaned over with a threatening snile.

"The fact that Miss Odell had blackmailed you wasn't your only reason for lying about the summons. It wasn't even your main reason."

Cleaver's eyes narrowed, but otherwise he was like a graven image.

"You evidently know more about it than I do." He managed to make his words sound casual.

"Not more, Mr. Cleaver," Markham corrected him, "but nearly as much.—Where were you between eleven o'clock and midnight Monday?"

"Perhaps that's one of the things you know."

"You're right.—You were in Miss Odell's apartment."

Cleaver sneered, but he did not succeed in disguising the shock that Markham's accusation caused him.

"If that's what you think, then it happens you don't know, after all. I haven't put foot in her apartment for two weeks."

"I have the testimony of reliable witnesses to the contrary."

"Witnesses!" The word seemed to force itself from Cleaver's compressed lips.

Markham nodded. "You were seen coming out of Miss Odell's apartment and leaving the house by the side door at five minutes to twelve on Monday night."

Cleaver's jaw sagged slightly, and his laboured breathing was quite audible.

"And between half-past eleven and twelve o'clock," pursued Markham's relentless voice, Miss "Odell was strangled and robbed.—What do you say to that?"

For a long time there was tense silence. Then Cleaver spoke.

"I've got to think this thing out."

Markham waited patiently. After several minutes Cleaver drew himself together and squared his shoulders.

"I'm going to tell you what I did that night, and you can take it or leave it." Again he was the cold, self-contained gambler. "I don't care how many witnesses you've got; it's the only story you'll ever get out of me. I should have told you in the first place, but I didn't see any sense of stepping into hot water if I wasn't pushed in. You might have believed me last Tuesday, but now you've got something in your head, and you want to make an arrest to shut up the newspapers——"

"Tell your story," ordered Markham. "If it's straight, you needn't worry about the newspapers."

Cleaver knew in his heart this was true. No one—not even his bitterest political enemies—had ever accused Markham of buying *kudos* with any act of injustice, however small.

"There's not much to tell, as a matter of fact," the man began. "I went to Miss Odell's house a little before midnight, but I didn't enter her apartment; I didn't even ring her bell."

"Is that your customary way of paying visits?"

"Sounds fishy, doesn't it? But it's the truth, nevertheless. I intended to see her—that is, I wanted to—but when I reached her door, something made me change my mind——"

"Just a moment.—How did you enter the house?"

"By the side door—the one off the alleyway. I always used it when it was open. Miss Odell requested me to, so that the telephone operator wouldn't see me coming in so often."

"And the door was unlocked at that time Monday night?"

"How else could I have got in by it? A key wouldn't have done me any good, even if I'd had one, for the door locks by a bolt on the inside. I'll say this, though: that's the first time I ever remember finding the door unlocked at night."

"All right. You went in the side entrance. Then what?"

"I walked down the rear hall and listened at the door of Miss Odell's apartment for a minute. I thought there might be someone else with her, and I didn't want to ring unless she was alone."

"Pardon my interrupting, Mr. Cleaver," interposed Vance. "But what made you think someone else was there?"

The man hesitated.

"Was it," prompted Vance, "because you had telephoned to Miss Odell a little while before, and had been answered by a man's voice?"

Cleaver nodded slowly. "I can't see any particular point in denying it . . . Yes, that's the reason."

"What did this man say to you?"

"Damn little. He said 'Hello,' and when I asked to speak to Miss Odell, he informed me she wasn't in, and hung up."

Vance addressed himself to Markham.

"That, I think, explains Jessup's report of the brief phone call to the Odell apartment at twenty minutes to twelve."

"Probably." Markham spoke without interest. He was intent on Cleaver's account of what happened later, and he took up the interrogation at the point where Vance had interrupted.

"You say you listened at the apartment door. What caused you to refrain from ringing?"

"I heard a man's voice inside."

Markham straightened up.

"A man's voice? You're sure?"

"That's what I said." Cleaver was matter of fact about it. "A man's voice. Otherwise I'd have rung the bell."

"Could you identify the voice?"

"Hardly. It was very indistinct; and it sounded a little hoarse. It wasn't anyone's voice I was familiar with; but I'd be inclined to say it was the same one that answered me over the 'phone."

"Could you make out anything that was said?"

Cleaver frowned and looked past Markham through the open window.

"I know what the words sounded like," he said slowly. "I didn't think anything of them at the time. But after reading the papers the next day, those words came back to me——"

"What were the words?" Markham cut in impatiently.

"Well, as near as I could make out, they were: 'Oh, my God! Oh, my God!'"—repeated two or three times."

This statement seemed to bring a sense of horror into the dreary old office—a horror all the more potent because of the casual, phlegmatic way in which Cleaver repeated that cry of anguish. After a brief pause Markham asked:

"When you heard this man's voice, what did you do?"

"I walked softly back down the rear hall and went out again through the side door. Then I went home."

A short silence ensued. Cleaver's testimony had been in the nature of a surprise; but it fitted perfectly with Mannix's statement.

Presently Vance lifted himself out of the depths of his chair.

"I say, Mr. Cleaver, what were you doing between twenty minutes to twelve—when you phoned Miss Odell—and five minutes to twelve—when you entered the side door of her apartment-house?"

"I was riding up-town in the subway from 23rd Street," came the answer after a short pause.

"Strange—very strange." Vance inspected the tip of

his cigarette. "Then you couldn't possibly have phoned to anyone during that fifteen minutes—eh, what?"

I suddenly remembered Alys La Fosse's statement that Cleaver had telephoned to her on Monday night at ten minutes to twelve. Vance, by his question, had, without revealing his own knowledge, created a state of uncertainty in the other's mind. Afraid to commit himself too emphatically, Cleaver resorted to an evasion.

"It's possible, is it not, that I could have phoned someone after leaving the subway at 72nd Street and before I walked the block to Miss Odell's house?"

"Oh, quite," murmured Vance. "Still, looking at it mathematically, if you 'phoned Miss Odell at twenty minutes to twelve, and then entered the subway, rode to 72nd Street, walked a block to 71st, went into the building, listened at her door, and departed at five minutes to twelve—making the total time consumed only fifteen minutes—you'd scarcely have sufficient leeway to stop en route and phone to anyone. However, I shan't press the point. But I'd really like to know what you did between eleven o'clock and twenty minutes to twelve, when you phoned to Miss Odell."

Cleaver studied Vance intently for a moment.

"To tell you the truth, I was upset that night. I knew Miss Odell was out with another man—she'd broken an appointment with me—and I walked the streets for an hour or more, fuming and fretting."

"Walked the streets?" Vance frowned.

"That's what I said." Cleaver spoke with animus. Then, turning, he gave Markham a long calculating look. "You remember I once suggested to you that you might learn something from a Doctor Lindquist. . . . Did you ever get after him?"

Before Markham could answer, Vance broke in.

"Ah! That's it—Doctor Lindquist! Well, well—of course! . . . So, Mr. Cleaver, you were walking the streets?"

The *streets*, mind you! Precisely!—You state the fact, and I echo the word ‘*streets*.’ And you—apparently out of a clear sky—ask about Doctor Lindquist. Why Doctor Lindquist? No one has mentioned him. But that word ‘*streets*’—that’s the connection. The streets and Doctor Lindquist are one—same as Paris and springtime are one. Neat, very neat. . . . And now I’ve got another piece to the puzzle.”

Markham and Heath looked at him as if he had suddenly gone mad. He calmly selected a *Régie* from his case and proceeded to light it. Then he smiled beguilingly at Cleaver.

“The time has come, my dear sir, for you to tell us when and where you met Doctor Lindquist while roaming the streets Monday night. If you don’t, ’pon my word, I’ll come pretty close to doing it for you.”

A full minute passed before Cleaver spoke; and during that time his cold staring eyes never moved from the District Attorney’s face.

“I’ve already told most of the story; so here’s the rest.” He gave a soft mirthless laugh. “I went to Miss Odell’s house a little before half past eleven—thought she might be at home at that time. There I ran into Doctor Lindquist standing in the entrance to the alleyway. He spoke to me, and told me someone was with Miss Odell in her apartment. Then I walked round the corner to the Ansonia Hotel. After ten minutes or so I telephoned Miss Odell, and, as I said, a man answered. I waited another ten minutes and phoned a friend of Miss Odell’s, hoping to arrange a party; but failing, I walked back to the house. The doctor had disappeared, and I went down the alleyway and in the side door. After listening a minute, as I told you, and hearing a man’s voice, I came away and went home. . . . That’s everything.”

At that moment Swacker came in and whispered something to Heath. The Sergeant rose with alacrity and followed the secretary out of the room. Almost at once he returned, bearing a bulging Manila folder. Handing it to

Markham, he said something in a low voice inaudible to the rest of us. Markham appeared both astonished and displeased. Waving the Sergeant back to his seat, he turned to Cleaver.

"I'll have to ask you to wait in the reception-room for a few minutes. Another urgent matter has just arisen."

Cleaver went out without a word, and Markham opened the folder.

"I don't like this sort of thing, Sergeant. I told you so yesterday when you suggested it."

"I understand, sir." Heath, I felt, was not as contrite as his tone indicated. "But if those letters and things are all right, and Cleaver hasn't been lying to us about 'em, I'll have my man put 'em back so's no one'll ever know they were taken. And if they do make Cleaver out a liar, then we've got a good excuse for grabbing 'em."

Markham did not argue the point. With a gesture of distaste he began running through the letters, looking particularly at the dates. Two photographs he put back after a cursory glance; and one piece of paper, which appeared to contain a pen and ink sketch of some kind, he tore up with disgust and threw into the waste-basket. Three letters, I noticed, he placed to one side. After five minutes' inspection of the others, he returned them to the folder. Then he nodded to Heath.

"Bring Cleaver back." He rose and, turning, gazed out of the window.

As soon as Cleaver was again seated before the desk Markham said, without looking round:

"You told me it was last June that you bought your letters back from Miss Odell. Do you recall the date?"

"Not exactly," said Cleaver easily. "It was early in the month, though--during the first week, I think."

Markham now spun about and pointed to the three letters he had segregated.

"How, then, do you happen to have in your possession

compromising letters which you wrote to Miss Odell from the Adirondacks late in July ? ”

Cleaver's self-control was perfect. After a moment's stoical silence, he merely said in a mild, quiet voice :

“ You of course came by those letters legally ? ”

Markham was stung, but he was also exasperated by the other's persistent deceptions.

“ I regret to confess,” he said, “ that they were taken from your apartment—though, I assure you, it was against my instructions. But since they have come unexpectedly into my possession, the wisest thing you can do is to explain them. There was an empty document-box in Miss Odell's apartment the morning her body was found, and, from all appearances, it had been opened Monday night ”

“ I see.” Cleaver laughed harshly. “ Very well The fact is—though I frankly don't expect you to believe me—I didn't pay my blackmail to Miss Odell until the middle of August, about three weeks ago. That's when all my letters were returned. I told you it was June in order to set back the date as far as possible. The older the affair was, I figured, the less likelihood there'd be of your suspecting me.”

Markham stood fingering the letters undecidedly. It was Vance who put an end to his irresolution.

“ I rather think, don't y' know,” he said, “ that you'd be safe in accepting Mr. Cleaver's explanation and returning his *billets-doux*.”

Markham, after a momentary hesitation, picked up the Manila folder and, replacing the three letters, handed it to Cleaver.

“ I wish you to understand that I did not sanction the appropriating of this correspondence. You'd better take it home and destroy it.—I won't detain you any longer now. But please arrange to remain where I can reach you if necessary.”

“ I'm not going to run away,” said Cleaver ; and Heath directed him to the elevator.

Chapter XXII

A TELEPHONE CALL

(Saturday, September 15th, 10 a m.)

HARRIS returned to the office, shaking his head hopelessly.

"There must've been a regular wake at Odell's Monday night."

"Quite," agreed Vance. "A midnight convulse of the lady's admirers. Mannix was there, unquestionably, and he saw Cleaver, and Cleaver saw Lindquist, and Lindquist saw Spotswood -"

"Humph! but nobody saw Skeel."

"The trouble is," said Starkham, "we don't know how much of Cleaver's story is true — And, by the way, Vance, do you believe he really bought his letters back in August?"

"If only we knew! Dished confusion, ain't it?"

"Anyway," argued Heath, "Cleaver's statement about phoning Odell at twenty minutes to twelve, and a man answering, is verified by Jessup's testimony. And I guess Cleaver saw Lindquist all right that night, for it was him who first tipped us off about the doc. He took a chance doing it, because the doc was liable to tell us he saw Cleaver."

"But if Cleaver had an allum' alibi," said Vance, "he could simply have said the doctor was lying. However, whether you accept Cleaver's absorbin' legend or not, you can take my word for it there was a visitor, other than Skeel, in the Odell apartment that night."

"That's all right, too," conceded Heath reluctantly.

"But, even so, this other fellow is only valuable to us as a possible source of evidence against Skeel."

"That may be true, Sergeant." Markham frowned perplexedly. "Only, I'd like to know how that side door was unbolted and then rebolted on the inside. We know now that it was open around midnight, and that Mannix and Cleaver both used it."

"You worry so over trifles," said Vance negligently. "The door problem will solve itself once we discover who was keeping company with Skeel in the Canary's gilded cage."

"I should say it boils down to Mannix, Cleaver, and Lindquist. They were the only three at all likely to be present; and if we accept Cleaver's story in its essentials, each of them had an opportunity of getting into the apartment between half-past eleven and midnight."

"True. But you have only Cleaver's word that Lindquist was in the neighbourhood. And that evidence, uncorroborated, can't be accepted as the lily-white truth."

Heath stared suddenly and looked at the clock.

"Say, what about that nurse you wanted at eleven o'clock?"

"I've been worrying horribly about her for an hour." Vance appeared actually troubled. "Really, y' know, I haven't the slightest desire to meet the lady. I'm hoping for a revelation, don't y' know. Let's wait for the doctor until half-past ten, Sergeant."

He had scarcely finished speaking when Swacker informed Markham that Doctor Lindquist had arrived on a mission of great urgency. It was an amusing situation. Markham laughed outright, while Heath stared at Vance with uncomprehending astonishment.

"It's not necromancy, Sergeant," smiled Vance. "The doctor realised yesterday that we were about to catch him in a falsehood; so he decided to forestall us by explaining personally. Simple, what?"

"Sure." Heath's look of wonderment disappeared.

As Doctor Lindquist entered the room I noted that his habitual urbanity had deserted him. His air was at once apologetic and apprehensive. That he was labouring under some great strain was evident.

"I've come, sir," he announced, taking the chair Markham indicated, "to tell you the truth about Monday night."

"The truth is always welcome, doctor," said Markham encouragingly.

Doctor Lindquist bowed agreement.

"I deeply regret that I did not follow that course at our first interview. But at that time I had not weighed the matter sufficiently; and, having once committed myself to a false statement, I felt I had no option but to abide by it. However, after more mature consideration, I have come to the conclusion that frankness is the wiser course.—The fact is, sir, I was not with Mrs. Breedon Monday night between the hours I mentioned. I remained at home until about half-past ten. Then I went to Miss Odell's house, arriving a little before eleven. I stood outside in the street until half-past eleven; then I returned home."

"Such a bare statement needs considerable amplification."

"I realise it, sir; and I am prepared to amplify it." Doctor Lindquist hesitated, and a strained look came into his white face. His hands were tightly clinched. "I had learned that Miss Odell was going to dinner and the theatre with a man named Spotswoode; and the thought of it began to prey on my mind. It was Spotswoode to whom I owed the alienation of Miss Odell's affections; and it was his interference that had driven me to my threat against the young woman. As I sat at home that night, letting my mind dwell morbidly on the situation, I was seized by the impulse to carry out that threat. Why not, I asked myself, end the intolerable situation at once? And why not include Spotswoode in the débâcle? . . ."

As he talked he became more and more agitated. The nerves about his eyes had begun to twitch, and his shoulders jerked like those of a man attempting vainly to control a chill.

"Remember, sir, I was suffering agonies, and my hatred of Spotswoode seemed to cloud my reason. Scarcely realising what I was doing, and yet operating under an irresistible determination, I put my automatic in my pocket and hurried out of the house. I thought Miss Odell and Spotswoode would be returning from the theatre soon, and I intended to force my way into the apartment and perform the act I had planned. . . . From across the street I saw them enter the house—it was about eleven then—but, when I came face to face with the actuality, I hesitated. I delayed my revenge; I—I played with the idea, getting a kind of insane satisfaction out of it—knowing they were now at my mercy. . . ."

His hands were shaking as with a coarse tremor; and the twitching about his eyes had increased.

"For half-an-hour I waited, gloating. Then, as I was about to go in and have it over with them, a man named Cleaver came along and saw me. He stopped and spoke. I thought he might be going to call on Miss Odell, so I told him she already had a visitor. He then went on toward the Broadway, and while I was waiting for him to turn the corner, Spotswoode came out of the house and jumped into a taxicab that had just driven up. . . . My plan had been thwarted—I had waited too long. Suddenly I seemed to awake as from some terrible nightmare. I was almost in a state of collapse, but I managed to get home. . . . That's what happened—so help me God!"

He sank back weakly in his chair. The suppressed nervous excitement that had fired him while he spoke had died out, and he appeared listless and indifferent. He sat several minutes breathing stertorously, and twice he passed his hand vaguely across his forehead. He was in no condi-

tion to be questioned, and finally Markham sent for Tracy and gave orders that he was to be taken to his home.

"Temporary exhaustion from hysteria," commented Vance indifferently "All these paranoia lads are hyper-neurasthenic. He'll be in a psychopathic ward in another year."

"That's as may be, Mr. Vance," said Heath, with an impatience that repudiated all enthusiasm for the subject of abnormal psychology. "What interests me just now is the way all these fellows' stories hang together."

"Yes," nodded Markham. "There is undeniably a groundwork of truth in their statements."

"But please observe," Vance pointed out, "that their stories do not eliminate any one of them as a possible culprit. Their tales, as you say, synchronise perfectly; and yet, despite all that neat co-ordination, any one of the three could have got into the Odell apartment that night. For instance. Mannix could have entered from Apartment 2 before Cleaver came along and listened; and he could have seen Cleaver going away when he himself was leaving the Odell apartment. — Cleaver could have spoken to the doctor at half past eleven, walked to the Ansonia, returned a little before twelve, gone into the lady's apartment, and come out just as Mannix opened Miss Frisbee's door — Again, the excitable doctor may have gone in after Spotswoode came out at half-past eleven, stayed twenty minutes or so, and departed before Cleaver returned from the Ansonia. . . . No; the fact that their stories dovetail doesn't in the least tend to exculpate any one of them."

"And," supplemented Markham, "that cry of 'Oh, my God!' might have been made by either Mannix or Lindquist—provided Cleaver really heard it."

"He heard it unquestionably," said Vance. "Someone in the apartment was invoking the Deity around midnight.

Cleaver hasn't sufficient sense of the dramatic to fabricate such a thrillin' *bonne-bouche*."

"But if Cleaver actually heard that voice," protested Markham, "then he is automatically eliminated as a suspect."

"Not at all, old dear. He may have heard it after he had come out of the apartment, and realised then, for the first time, that someone had been hidden in the place during his visit."

"Your man in the clothes-closet, I presume you mean."

"Yes—of course. . . . You know, Markham, it might have been the horrified Skeel, emerging from his hiding-place upon a scene of tragic wreckage, who let out that evangelical invocation."

"Except," commented Markham, with sarcasm, "Skeel doesn't impress me as particularly religious."

"Oh, that?" Vance shrugged. "A point in substantiation. Irreligious persons call on God much more than Christians. The only true and consistent theologians, don't y' know, are the atheists."

Heath, who had been sitting in gloomy meditation, took his cigar from his mouth and heaved a heavy sigh.

"Yes," he ruml'd, "I'm willing to admit somebody besides Skeel got into Odell's apartment, and that the Dude hid in the clothes-closet. But, if that's so, then this other fellow didn't see Skeel, and it's not going to do us a whole lot of good even if we identify him."

"Don't fret on that point, Sergeant," Vance counselled him cheerfully. "When you've identified this other mysterious visitor you'll be positively amazed how black care will desert you. You'll rubricate the hour you find him. You'll leap gladsomely in the air. You'll sing a roundelay."

"The hell I will!" said Heath.

Swacker came in with a typewritten memorandum, and put it on the District Attorney's desk.

"The architect just phoned in this report."

Markham glanced it over; it was very brief.

"No help here," he said. "Walls solid. No waste space. No hidden entrances."

"Too bad, Sergeant," sighed Vance. "You'll have to drop the cinema idea. . . . Sad."

Heath grunted and looked disconsolate.

"Even without no other way of getting in or out except that side door," he said to Markham, "couldn't we get an indictment against Skeel, now that we know that the door was unlocked Monday night?"

"We might, Sergeant. But our chief snag would be to show how it was originally unlocked and then rebolted after Skeel left. And Abe Rubin would concentrate on that point.—No, we'd better wait awhile and see what develops."

Something "developed" at once. Swacker entered and informed the Sergeant that Snitkin wanted to see him immediately.

Snitkin came in, visibly agitated, accompanied by a wizened, shabbily dressed little man of about sixty, who appeared awed and terrified. In the detective's hand was a small parcel wrapped in newspaper, which he laid on the District Attorney's desk with an air of triumph.

"The Canary's jewellery," he announced. "I've checked it up from the list the maid gave me, and it's all there."

Heath sprang forward, but Markham was already untying the package with nervous fingers. When the paper had been opened, there lay before us a small heap of dazzling trinkets—several rings of exquisite workmanship, three magnificent bracelets, a sparkling sunburst, and a delicately wrought lorgnette. The stones were all large and of unconventional cut.

Markham looked up from them inquisitively, and Snitkin, not waiting for the inevitable question, explained.

"This man Potts found 'em. He's a street-cleaner, and

he says they were in one of the D. S. C. cans at 23rd Street near the Flatiron Building. He found 'em yesterday afternoon, so he says, and took 'em home. Then he got scared and brought 'em to Police Headquarters this morning."

Mr. Potts, the "white-wing," was trembling visibly.

"Thass right, sir- thass right," he assured Markham, with frightened eagerness. "I allus look into any bundles I find. I didn't mean no harm takin' 'em home, sir. I wasn't gonna keep 'em. I laid awake worryin' all night, an' this mornin', as soon as I got a chance, I took 'em to the p'lice." He shook so violently, I was afraid he was going to break down completely.

"That's all right, Potts," Markham told him in a kindly voice. Then to Snitkin: "Let the man go—only get his full name and address."

Vance had been studying the newspaper in which the jewels had been wrapped.

"I say, my man," he asked, "is this the original paper you found them in?"

"Yes, sir—the same. I ain't touched nothin'."

"Right-o"

Mr. Potts, greatly relieved, shambled out, followed by Snitkin.

"The Flatiron Building is directly across Madison Square from the Stuyvesant Club," observed Markham, frowning.

"So it is." Vance then pointed to the left hand margin of the newspaper that held the jewels. "And you'll notice that this *Herald* of yesterday has three punctures evidently made by the pins of a wooden holder such as is generally used in a club's reading-room."

"You got a good eye, Mr. Vance," nodded Heath inspecting the newspaper.

"I'll see about this." Markham viciously pressed a button. "They keep their papers on file for a week at the Stuyvesant Club."

When Swacker appeared, he asked that the club's steward be got immediately on the telephone. After a short delay, the connection was made. At the end of five minutes' conversation Markham hung up the receiver and gave Heath a baffled look.

"The club takes two *Heralds*. Both of yesterday's copies are there, on the rack."

"Didn't Cleaver once tell us he read nothing but *The Herald*—that and some racing-sheet at night?" Vance put the question off-handedly.

"I believe he did." Markham considered the suggestion. "Still, both the club *Heralds* are accounted for." He turned to Heath. "When you were checking up on Mannix, did you find out what clubs he belonged to?"

"Sure." The Sergeant took out his note-book and ruffled the pages for a minute or two. "He's a member of the Furriers' and the Cosmopolis."

Markham pushed the telephone toward him.

"See what you can find out."

Heath was fifteen minutes at the task.

"A blank," he announced finally. "The Furriers' don't use holders, and the Cosmopolis don't keep any back numbers."

"What about Mr. Skeel's clubs, Sergeant?" asked Vance, smiling.

"Oh, I know the finding of that jewellery gums up my theory about Skeel," said Heath, with surly ill nature. "But what's the good of rubbing it in? Still, if you think I'm going to give that bird a clean bill of health just because the Odell swag was found in a trash-can, you're mighty mistaken. Don't forget we're watching the Dude pretty close. He may have got leery, and tipped off some pal he'd caught the jewels with."

"I rather fancy the experienced Skeel would have turned his booty over to a professional receiver. But even had he

passed it on to a friend, would this friend have been likely to throw it away because Skeel was worried?"

"Maybe not. But there's some explanation for those jewels being found, and when we get hold of it, it won't eliminate Skeel."

"No; the explanation won't eliminate Skeel," said Vance; "but—my word!—how it'll change his *locus standi*."

Heath contemplated him with shrewdly appraising eyes. Something in Vance's tone had apparently piqued his curiosity and set him to wondering. Vance had too often been right in his diagnoses of persons and things for the Sergeant to ignore his opinions wholly.

But before he could answer, Swacker stepped alertly into the room, his eyes animated.

"Tony Skeel's on the wire, Chief, and wants to speak to you."

Markham, despite his habitual reserve, gave a start.

"Here, Sergeant," he said quickly. "Take that extension phone on the table and listen in." He nodded curtly to Swacker, who disappeared to make the connection. Then he took up the receiver of his own telephone and spoke to Skeel.

For a minute or so he listened. Then, after a brief argument, he concurred with some suggestion that had evidently been made; and the conversation ended.

"Skeel craves an audience, I gather," said Vance. "I've rather been expecting it, y' know."

"Yes. He's coming here to-morrow at ten."

"And he hinted that he knew who slew the Canary—eh, what?"

"That's just what he did say. He promised to tell me the whole story to-morrow morning."

"He's the lad that's in a position to do it," murmured Vance.

"But, Mr. Markham," said Heath, who still sat with

his hand on the telephone, gazing at the instrument with dazed incredulity, "I don't see why you don't have him brought here to-day."

"As you heard, Sergeant, Skeel insisted on to-morrow, and threatened to say nothing if I forced the issue. It's just as well not to antagonise him. We might spoil a good chance of getting some light on this case if I ordered him brought here and used pressure. And to-morrow suits me. It'll be quiet around here then. Moreover, your man's watching Skeel, and he won't get away"

"I guess you're right, sir. The Dude's touchy, and he can give a swell imitation of an oyster when he feels like it" The Sergeant spoke with feeling

"I'll have Swacker here to-morrow to take down his statement," Markham went on; "and you'd better put one of your men on the elevator,—the regular operator is off Sundays. Also, plant a man in the hall outside, and put another one in Swacker's office"

Vance stretched himself luxuriously and rose.

"Most considerate of the gentleman to call up at this time, don't y' know. I had a longing to see the Monets at Durand Ruel's this afternoon, and I was afraid I wasn't going to be able to drag myself away from this fascinatin' case. Now that the apocalypse has been definitely scheduled for to-morrow, I'll indulge my taste for Impressionism.

. . . *A demain*, Markham. By bye, Sergeant"

Chapter XXIII

THE TEN O'CLOCK APPOINTMENT

(Sunday, September 16th; 10 a.m.)

A FINE drizzle was falling the next morning when we rose; and a chill—the first forerunner of winter—was in the air. We had breakfast in the library at half-past eight, and at nine o'clock Vance's car—which had been ordered the night before—called for us. We rode down Fifth Avenue, now almost deserted in its thick blanket of yellow fog, and called for Markham at his apartment in West 12th Street. He was waiting for us in front of the house, and stepped quickly into the car with scarcely a word of greeting. From his anxious, preoccupied look I knew that he was depending a good deal on what Skeel had to tell him.

We had turned into West Broadway beneath the Elevated tracks before any of us spoke. Then Markham voiced a doubt which was plain'y an articulation of his troubled ruminations.

"I'm wondering if, after all, this fellow Skeel can have any important information to give us. His phone call was very strange. Yet he spoke confidently enough regarding his knowledge. No dramatics, no request for immunity—just a plain, assured statement that he knew who murdered the Odell girl, and had decided to come clean."

"It's certain he himself did not strangle the lady," pronounced Vance. "My theory, as you know, is that he was hiding in the clothes-press when the shady business was being enacted; and all along I've clung lovingly to the idea that he was *au secret* to the entire proceedings. The keyhole of that closet door is on a direct line with the

end of the davenport where the lady was strangled; and if a rival was operating at the time of his concealment, it's not unreasonable to assume that he peered forth—eh, what? I questioned him on this point, you remember; and he didn't like it a bit."

"But, in that case——"

"Oh, I know. There are all kinds of erudite objections to my wild dream.—Why didn't he give the alarm? Why didn't he tell us about it before? Why this? and why that? . . . I make no claim to omniscience, y' know; I don't even pretend to have a logical explanation for the various *traits d'union* of my vagary. My theory is only sketched in, as it were. But I'm convinced, nevertheless, that the modish Tony knows who killed his *bona roba* and looted her apartment."

"But of the three persons who possibly could have got into the Odell apartment that night—namely, Mannix, Cleaver and Lindquist—Skeel evidently knows only one—Mannix."

"Yes—to be sure. And Mannix, it would seem, is the only one of the trio who knows Skeel. . . . An interestin' point."

Heath met us at the Franklin Street entrance to the Criminal Courts Building. He, too, was anxious and subdued, and he shook hands with us in a detached manner devoid of his usual heartiness.

"I've got Snitkin running the elevator," he said, after the briefest of salutations. "Burke's in the hall upstairs, and Emery is with him, waiting to be let into Swacker's office."

We entered the deserted and almost silent building and rode up to the fourth floor. Markham unlocked his office door and we passed in.

"Guilfoyle, the man who's tailing Skeel," Heath explained, when we were seated, "is to report by phone to the Homicide Bureau as soon as the Dude leaves his rooms."

It was now twenty minutes to ten. Five minutes later Swacker arrived. Taking his stenographic note-book, he stationed himself just inside of the swinging door of Mark-

ham's private sanctum, where he could hear all that was said without being seen. Markham lit a cigar, and Heath followed suit. Vance was already smoking placidly. He was the calmest person in the room, and lay back languorously in one of the great leather chairs as though immune to all cares and vicissitudes. But I could tell by the over-deliberate way he flicked his ashes into the receiver that he, too, was uneasy.

Five or six minutes passed in complete silence. Then the Sergeant gave a grunt of annoyance.

"No, sir," he said, as if completing some unspoken thought, "I can't get a slant on this business. The finding of that jewellery, now, all nicely wrapped up . . . and then the Dude offering to squeal. . . . There's no sense to it."

"It's tryin', I know, Sergeant; but it's not altogether senseless." Vance was gazing lazily at the ceiling. "The chap who confiscated those baubles didn't have any use for them. He didn't want them, in fact—they worried him abominably."

The point was too complex for Heath. The previous day's developments had shaken the foundation of all his arguments; and he lapsed again into brooding silence.

At ten o'clock he rose impatiently and, going to the hall door, looked out. Returning, he compared his watch with the office clock and began pacing restlessly. Markham was attempting to sort some papers on his desk, but presently he pushed them aside with an impatient gesture.

"He ought to be coming along now," he remarked, with an effort at cheerfulness.

"He'll come," growled Heath, "or he'll get a free ride." And he continued his pacing.

A few minutes later he turned abruptly and went out into the hall. We could hear him calling to Snitkin down the elevator shaft, but when he came back into the office his expression told us that as yet there was no news of Skeel.

"I'll call up the Bureau," he decided, "and see what

Guilfoyle had to report. At least we'll know then when the Dude left his house."

But when the Sergeant had been connected with Police Headquarters he was informed that Guilfoyle had as yet made no report.

"That's damn funny," he commented, hanging up the receiver.

It was now twenty minutes past ten. Markham was growing restive. The tenacity with which the Canary murder case had resisted all his efforts toward a solution had filled him with discouragement; and he had hoped, almost desperately, that his morning's interview with Skeel would clear up the mystery, or at least supply him with information on which definite action could be taken. Now, with Skeel late for this all-important appointment, the strain was becoming tense.

He pushed back his chair nervously and, going to the window, gazed out into the dark haze of fine rain. When he returned to his desk his face was set.

"I'll give our friend until half-past ten," he said grimly. "If he isn't here then, Sergeant, you'd better call up the local station-house and have them send a patrol-wagon for him."

There was another few minutes of silence. Vance lolled in his chair with half-closed eyes, but I noticed that, though he still held his cigarette, he was not smoking. His forehead was puckered by a frown, and he was very quiet. I knew that some unusual problem was occupying him. His lethargy had in it a quality of intentness and concentration.

As I watched him he suddenly sat up straight, his eyes open and alert. He tossed his dead cigarette into the receiver with a jerky movement that attested to some inner excitement.

"Oh, my word!" he exclaimed. "It really can't be, y' know! And yet"—his face darkened—"and yet, by Jove, that's it! . . . What an ass I've been—what an unutterable ass! . . . Oh!"

He sprang to his feet; then stood looking down at the floor like a man dazed, afraid of his own thoughts.

"Markham, I don't like it—I don't like it at all." He spoke almost as if he were frightened. "I tell you, there's something terrible going on—something uncanny. The thought of it makes my flesh creep. . . . I must be getting old and sentimental," he added, with an effort at lightness; but the look in his eyes belied his tone. "Why didn't I see this thing yesterday? . . . But I let it go on. . . ."

We were all staring at him in amazement. I had never seen him affected in this way before, and the fact that he was habitually so cynical and aloof, so adamant to emotion and impervious to outside influences, gave his words and actions an impelling and impressive quality.

After a moment he shook himself slightly, as if to throw off the pall of horror that had descended upon him, and stepping to Markham's desk, he leaned over, resting on both hands.

"Don't you see?" he asked. "Skeel's not coming. No use to wait—no use of our having come here in the first place. We have to go to him. He's waiting for us. . . . Come! Get your hat."

Markham had risen, and Vance took him firmly by the arm.

"You needn't argue," he persisted. "You'll have to go to him sooner or later. You might as well go now, don't y' know.—My word! What a situation!"

He had led Markham, astonished and but mildly protesting, into the middle of the room, and he now beckoned to Heath with his free hand.

"You, too, Sergeant. Sorry you had all this trouble. My fault. I should have foreseen this thing. A devilish shame; but my mind was on Monets all yesterday afternoon. . . . You know where Skeel lives?"

Heath nodded mechanically. He had fallen under the spell of Vance's strange and dynamic importunities.

"Then don't wait.—And, Sergeant! You'd better bring

Burke or Snitkin along. They won't be needed here—nobody'll be needed here any more to-day."

Heath looked inquiringly to Markham for counsel; his bewilderment had thrown him into a state of mute indecision. Markham nodded his approval of Vance's suggestions, and, without a word, slipped into his raincoat. A few minutes later the four of us, accompanied by Snitkin, had entered Vance's car and were lurching up-town. Swacker had been sent home; the office had been locked up; and Burke and Emery had departed for the Homicide Bureau to await further instructions.

Skeel lived in 35th Street, near the East River, in a dingy, but once pretentious, house which formerly had been the residence of some old family of the better class. It now had an air of dilapidation and decay; there was rubbish in the area-way; and a large sign announcing rooms for rent was posted in one of the ground-floor windows.

As we drew up before it Heath sprang to the street and looked sharply about him. Presently he espied an unkempt man slouching in the doorway of a grocery-store diagonally opposite, and beckoned to him. The man shambled over furtively.

"It's all right, Guilfoyle," the Sergeant told him. "We're paying the Dude a social visit.--What's the trouble? Why didn't you report?"

Guilfoyle looked surprised.

"I was told to phone in when he left the house, sir. But he ain't left yet. Mallory tailed him home last night round ten o'clock, and I relieved Mallory at nine this morning. The Dude's still inside."

"Of course he's still inside, Sergeant," said Vance, a bit impatiently.

"Where's his room situated, Guilfoyle?" asked Heath.

"Second floor, at the back."

"Right. We're going in.--Stand by."

"Look out for him," admonished Guilfoyle. "He's got a gat."

Heath took the lead up the worn steps which led from the pavement to the little vestibule. Without ringing, he roughly grasped the door-knob and shook it. The door was unlocked, and we stepped into the stuffy lower hallway.

A bedraggled woman of about forty, in a disreputable dressing-gown, and with hair hanging in strings over her shoulders, emerged suddenly from a rear door and came toward us unsteadily, her bleary eyes focussed on us with menacing resentment.

"Say!" she burst out, in a rasping voice. "What do youse mean by bustin' in like this on a respectable lady?" And she launched forth upon a stream of profane epithets.

Heath, who was nearest her, placed his large hand over her face, and gave her a gentle but firm shove backward.

"You keep out of this, Cleopatra!" he advised her, and began to ascend the stairs.

The second-floor hallway was dimly lighted by a small flickering gas-jet, and at the rear we could distinguish the outlines of a single door set in the middle of the wall.

"That'll be Mr. Skeel's abode," observed Heath.

He walked up to it and, dropping one hand in his right coat-pocket, turned the knob. But the door was locked. He then knocked violently upon it, and placing his ear to the jamb, listened. Snitkin stood directly behind him, his hand also in his pocket. The rest of us remained a little in the rear.

Heath had knocked a second time when Vance's voice spoke up from the semi-darkness.

"I say, Sergeant, you're wasting time with all that formality."

"I guess you're right," came the answer after a moment of what seemed unbearable silence.

Heath bent down and looked at the lock. Then he took some instrument from his pocket and inserted it into the keyhole.

"You're right," he repeated. "The key's gone."

He stepped back and, balancing on his toes like a sprinter,

sent his shoulders crashing against the panel directly over the knob. But the lock held.

"Come on, Snitkin," he ordered.

The two detectives hurled themselves against the door. At the third onslaught there was a splintering of wood and a tearing of the lock's bolt through the moulding. The door swung drunkenly inward.

The room was in almost complete darkness. We all hesitated on the threshold, while Snitkin crossed warily to one of the windows and sent the shade clattering up. The yellow-grey light filtered in, and the objects of the room at once took definable form. A large, old-fashioned bed projected from the wall on the right.

"Look!" cried Snitkin, pointing; and something in his voice sent a shiver over me.

We pressed forward. On the foot of the bed, at the side toward the door, sprawled the crumpled body of Skeel. Like the Canary, he had been strangled. His head hung back over the foot-board, his face a hideous distortion. His arms were outstretched and one leg trailed over the edge of the mattress, resting on the floor.

"Thuggee," murmured Vance. "Lindquist mentioned it.—Curious!"

Heath stood staring fixedly at the body, his shoulders hunched. His normal ruddiness of complexion was gone, and he seemed like a man hypnotised.

"Mother o' God!" he breathed, awe-stricken. And with an involuntary motion, he crossed himself.

Markham was shaken also. He set his jaw rigidly.

"You're right, Vance." His voice was strained and unnatural. "Something sinister and terrible has been going on here. . . . There's a fiend loose in this town—a werewolf."

"I wouldn't say that, old man." Vance regarded the murdered Skeel critically. "No, I wouldn't say that. Not a werewolf. Just a desperate human being. A man of extremes, perhaps—but quite rational, and logical—oh, how deuced logical!"

Chapter XXIV

AN ARREST

Sunday, p.m., Monday, a.m. ; September 16th-17th)

THE investigation into Skeel's death was pushed with great vigour by the authorities. Doctor Doremus, the Medical Examiner, arrived promptly and declared that the crime had taken place between ten o'clock and midnight. Immediately Vance insisted that all the men who were known to have been intimately acquainted with the Odell girl—Mannix, Lindquist, Cleaver, and Spotswoode—be interviewed at once and made to explain where they were during these two hours. Markham agreed without hesitation, and gave the order to Heath, who at once put four of his men on the task.

Mallory, the detective who had shadowed Skeel the previous night, was questioned regarding possible visitors; but inasmuch as the house where Skeel lived accommodated over twenty roomers, who were constantly coming and going at all hours, no information could be gained through that channel. All that Mallory could say definitely was that Skeel had returned home at about ten o'clock, and had not come out again. The landlady, shored and subdued by the tragedy, repudiated all knowledge of the affair. She explained that she had been "ill" in her room from dinner-time until we had disturbed her recuperation the next morning. The front door, it seemed, was never locked, since her tenants objected to such an unnecessary inconvenience. The tenants themselves were questioned, but without result: they were not of a class likely to give information to the police, even had they possessed any.

The finger-print experts made a careful examination of the room, but failed to find any marks except Skeel's own. A thorough search through the murdered man's effects occupied several hours; but nothing was discovered that gave any hint of the murderer's identity. A .38 Colt automatic, fully loaded, was found under one of the pillows on the bed; and eleven hundred dollars, in bills of large denomination, was taken from a hollow brass curtain-rod. Also, under a loose board in the hall, the missing steel chisel, with the fissure in the blade, was found. But these items were of no value in solving the mystery of Skeel's death; and at four o'clock in the afternoon the room was closed with an emergency padlock and put under guard.

Markham and Vance and I had remained several hours after our discovery of the body. Markham had taken immediate charge of the case, and had conducted the interrogation of the tenants. Vance had watched the routine activities of the police with unwonted intentness, and had even taken part in the search. He had seemed particularly interested in Skeel's evening clothes, and had examined them garment by garment. Heath had looked at him from time to time, but there had been neither contempt nor amusement in the Sergeant's glances.

At half-past two Markham departed, after informing Heath that he would be at the Stuyvesant Club during the remainder of the day; and Vance and I went with him. We had a belated luncheon in the empty grill.

"This Skeel episode rather knocks the foundation from under everything," Markham said dispiritedly, as our coffee was served.

"Oh, no—not that," Vance answered. "Rather, let us say that it has added a new column to the edifice of my giddy theory."

"Your theory—yes. It's about all that's left to go on." Markham sighed. "It has certainly received substantiation this morning. . . . Remarkable how you called the turn when Skeel failed to show up."

Again Vance contradicted him.

"You overestimate my little flutter in forensics, Markham dear. You see, I assumed that the lady's strangler knew of Skeel's offer to you. That offer was probably a threat of some kind on Skeel's part; otherwise he wouldn't have set the appointment a day ahead. He no doubt hoped the victim of his threat would become amenable in the meantime. And that money hidden in the curtain-rod leads me to think he was blackmailing the Canary's murderer, and had been refused a further donation just before he phoned you yesterday. That would account, too, for his having kept his guilty knowledge to himself all this time."

"You may be right. But now we're worse off than ever, for we haven't even Skeel to guide us."

"At least we've forced our elusive culprit to commit a second crime to cover up his first, don't y' know. And when we have learned what the Canary's various amorists were doing last night between ten and twelve, we may have something suggestive on which to work. -By the bye, when may we expect this thrillin' information?"

"It depends upon what luck Heath's men have. Tonight some time, if everything goes well."

It was, in fact, about half-past eight when Heath telephoned the reports. But here again Markham seemed to have drawn a blank. A less satisfactory account could scarcely be imagined. Doctor Lundquist had suffered a "nervous stroke" the preceding afternoon, and had been taken to the Episcopal Hospital. He was still there under the care of two eminent physicians whose word it was impossible to doubt; and it would be a week at least before he would be able to resume his work. This report was the only definite one of the four, and it completely exonerated the doctor from any participation in the previous night's crime.

By a curious coincidence neither Mannix, nor Cleaver, nor Spotswoode could furnish a satisfactory alibi. All three of them, according to their statements, had remained at home the night before. The weather had been inclement;

and though Mannix and Spotswoode admitted to having been out earlier in the evening, they stated that they had returned home before ten o'clock. Mannix lived in an apartment-hotel, and, as it was Saturday night, the lobby was crowded, so that no one would have been likely to see him come in. Cleaver lived in a small private apartment-house without a door-man or hall-boys to observe his movements. Spotswoode was staying at the Stuyvesant Club, and since his rooms were on the third floor he rarely used the elevator. Moreover, there had been a political reception and dance at the club the previous night, and he might have walked in and out at random a dozen times without being noticed.

"Not what you'd call illuminatin'," said Vance, when Markham had given him this information.

"It eliminates Lindquist, at any rate."

"Quite. And, automatically, it eliminates him as an object of suspicion in the Canary's death also, for these two crimes are part of a whole—integers of the same problem. They complement each other. The latter was conceived in relation to the first—was, in fact, a logical outgrowth of it." Markham nodded.

"That's reasonable enough. Anyway, I've passed the combative stage. I think I'll drift for a while on the stream of your theory and see what happens."

"What irks me is the disquietin' feeling that positively nothing will happen unless we force the issue. The lad who manoeuvred those two obits had real bean in him."

As he spoke Spotswoode entered the room and looked about as if searching for someone. Catching sight of Markham he came briskly forward, with a look of inquisitive perplexity.

"Forgive me for intruding, sir," he apologised, nodding pleasantly to Vance and me, "but a police officer was here this afternoon inquiring as to my whereabouts last night. It struck me as strange, but I thought little of it until I happened to see the name of Tony Skeel in the headlines of a 'special' to-night and read he had been strangled. I remember you asked me regarding such a man in connection

with Miss Odell, and I wondered if, by any chance, there could be any connection between the two murders, and if I was, after all, to be drawn into the affair."

"No, I think not," said Markham. "There seemed a possibility that the two crimes were related; and, as a matter of routine, the police questioned all the close friends of Miss Odell in the hope of turning up something suggestive. You may dismiss the matter from your mind. I trust," he added, "the officer was not unpleasantly importunate."

"Not at all." Spotswoode's look of anxiety disappeared. "He was extremely courteous but a bit mysterious.—Who was this man Skeel?"

"A half-world character and ex-burglar. He had some hold on Miss Odell, and, I believe, extorted money from her."

A cloud of angry disgust passed over Spotswoode's face.

"A creature like that deserves the fate that overtook him."

We chatted on various matters until ten o'clock, when Vance rose and gave Markham a reproachful look.

"I'm going to try to recover some lost sleep. I'm temperamentally unfitted for a policeman's life."

Despite this complaint, however, nine o'clock the next morning found him at the District Attorney's office. He had brought several newspapers with him, and was reading, with much amusement, the first complete accounts of Skeel's murder. Monday was generally a busy day for Markham, and he had arrived at the office before half-past eight in an effort to clean up some pressing routine matters before proceeding with his investigation of the Odell case. Heath, I knew, was to come for a conference at ten o'clock. In the meantime there was nothing for Vance to do but read the newspapers; and I occupied myself in like manner.

Punctually at ten Heath arrived, and from his manner it was plain that something had happened to cheer him immeasurably. He was almost jaunty, and his formal, self-satisfied salutation to Vance was like that of a conqueror to a vanquished adversary. He shook hands with Markham with more than his customary punctility.

"Our troubles are over, sir," he said, and paused to light his cigar. "I've arrested Jessup."

It was Vance who broke the dramatic silence following this astounding announcement.

"In the name of Heaven—what for?"

Heath turned deliberately, in no wise abashed by the other's tone.

"For the murder of Margaret Odell and Tony Skeel."

"Oh, my aunt! Oh, my precious aunt!" Vance sat up and stared at him in amazement. "Sweet angels of heaven, come down and solace me!"

Heath's complacency was unshaken.

"You won't need no angels, or aunts either, when you hear what I've found out about this fellow. I've got him tied up in a sack, ready to hand to the jury."

The first wave of Markham's astonishment had subsided.

"Let's have the story, Sergeant."

Heath settled himself in a chair. He took a few moments to arrange his thoughts.

"It's like this, sir. Yesterday afternoon I got to thinking. Here was Skeel murdered, same like Odell, after he'd promised to squeal; and it certainly looked as though the same guy had strangled both of 'em. Therefore, I concluded that there must've been two guys in the apartment Monday night—the Dude and the murderer—just like Mr. Vance has been saying all along. Then I figured that they knew each other pretty well, because not only did the other fellow know where the Dude lived, but he must've been wise to the fact that the Dude was going to squeal yesterday. It looked to me, sir, like they had pulled the Odell job together—which is why the Dude didn't squeal in the first place. But after the other fellow lost his nerve and threw the jewellery away, Skeel thought he'd play safe by turning state's evidence, so he phoned you."

The Sergeant smoked a moment.

"I never put much stock in Mannix and Cleaver and the Doc. They weren't the kind to do a job like that, and they

certainly weren't the kind that would be mixed up with a jailbird like Skeel. So I stood all three of 'em to one side, and began looking round for a bad egg—somebody who'd have been likely to be Skeel's accomplice. But first I tried to figure out what you might call the physical obstacles in the case—that is, the snags we were up against in our reconstruction of the crime."

Again he paused.

"Now, the thing that's been bothering us most is that side door. How did it get unlatched after six o'clock? And who bolted it again after the crime? Skeel must've come in by it before eleven, because he was in the apartment when Spotswoode and Odell returned from the theatre, and he probably went out by it after Cleaver had come to the apartment at about midnight. But that wasn't explaining how it got bolted again on the inside. Well, sir, I studied over this for a long time yesterday, and then I went up to the house and took another look at the door. Young Spively was running the switchboard, and I asked him where Jessup was, for I wanted to ask him some questions. And Spively told me he'd quit his job the day before—Sunday afternoon."

Henth waited to let the fact sink in.

"I was on my way downtown before the idea came to me. Then it hit me sudden like, and the whole case broke wide open—Mr. Markham, nobody but Jessup could've opened that side door and locked it again—nobody. Figure it out for yourself, sir—though I guess you've pretty well done it already. Skeel couldn't've done it. And there wasn't nobody else to do it."

Markham had become interested, and leaned forward.

"After this idea had hit me," Henth continued, "I decided to take a chance, so I got out of the subway at the Penn Station, and phoned Spively for Jessup's address. Then I got my first good news. Jessup lived on Second Avenue, right around the corner from Skeel. I picked up a couple of men from the local station, and went to his house

We found him packing up his things, getting ready to go to Detroit. We locked him up, and I took his finger-prints and sent 'em to Dubois. I thought I might get a line on him that way, because crooks don't generally begin with a job as big as the Canary prowl."

Heath permitted himself a grin of satisfaction.

"Well, sir, Dubois nailed him up! His name ain't Jessup at all. The William part is all right, but his real moniker is Benton. He was convicted of assault and battery in Oakland in 1909, and served a year in San Quentin when Skeel was a prisoner there. He was also grabbed as a lookout in a bank robbery in Brooklyn in 1914, but didn't come to trial—that's how we happen to have his finger prints at Headquarters. When we put him on the grill last night, he said he changed his name after the Brooklyn racket, and enlisted in the army. That's all we could get out of him; but we didn't need any more.—Now, here are the facts: Jessup has served time for assault and battery. He was mixed up in a bank robbery. Skeel was a fellow prisoner of his. He's got no alibi for Saturday night when Skeel was killed, and he lives round the corner. He quit his job suddenly Saturday afternoon. He's husky and strong and could easily have done the business. He was planning his getaway when we nabbed him. *And* he's the only person who could've unbolted and rebolted that side door Monday night. . . . Is that a case, or ain't it, Mr. Markham?"

Markham sat several minutes in thought.

"It's a good case as far as it goes," he said slowly. "But what was his motive in strangling the girl?"

"That's easy. Mr Vance here suggested it the first day. You remember he asked Jessup about his feelings for Odell: and Jessup turned red and got nervous"

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Vance. "Am I to be made responsible for any part of this priceless lunacy? . . . True, I pried into the chap's emotions toward the lady; but that was before anything had come to light. I was bein' careful—tryin' to test each possibility as it arose."

"Well, that was a lucky question of yours, just the same." Heath turned back to Markham. "As I see it: Jessup was stuck on Odell, and she told him to trot along and sell his papers. He got all worked up over it, sitting there night after night, seeing these other guys calling on her. Then Skeel comes along, and recognising him, suggests burglarising Odell's apartment. Skeel can't do the job without help, for he has to pass the 'phone operator coming and going; and as he's been there before, he'd be recognised. Jessup sees a chance of getting even with Odell and putting the blame on someone else; so the two of 'em cook up the job for Monday night. When Odell goes out Jessup unlocks the side door, and the Dude lets himself into the apartment with his own key. Then Odell and Spotswoode arrive unexpectedly. Skeel hides in the closet, and after Spotswoode has gone, he accidentally makes a noise, and Odell screams. He steps out, and when she sees who he is, she tells Spotswoode it's a mistake. Jessup now knows Skeel has been discovered, and decides to make use of the fact. Soon after Spotswoode has gone, he enters the apartment with a pass-key. Skeel, thinking it's somebody else, hides again in the closet; and then Jessup grabs the girl and strangles her, intending to let Skeel get the credit for it. But Skeel comes out of hiding and they talk it over. Finally they come to an agreement, and proceed with their original plan to loot the place. Jessup tries to open the jewel-case with the poker, and Skeel finishes the job with his chisel. They then go out. Skeel leaves by the side door, and Jessup bolts it. The next day Skeel hands the swag to Jessup to keep till things blow over; and Jessup gets scared and throws it away. Then they have a row. Skeel decides to tell everything, so he can get out from under; and Jessup, suspecting he's going to do it, goes round to his house Saturday night and strangles him like he did Odell."

Heath made a gesture of finality and sank back in his chair.

"Clever—deuced clever," murmured Vance. "Sergeant, I apologise for my little outburst a moment ago. Your logic is irreproachable. You've reconstructed the crime beauti-

fully. You've solved the case. . . . It's wonderful—simply wonderful. But it's wrong."

"It's right enough to send Mr. Jessup to the chair."

"That's the terrible thing about logic," said Vance. "It so often leads one irresistibly to a false conclusion"

He stood up and walked across the room and back, his hands in his coat-pockets. When he came abreast of Heath he halted.

"I say, Sergeant; if somebody else could have unlocked that side door and then rebolted it again after the crime, you'd be willing to admit that it would weaken your case against Jessup—eh, what?" Heath was in a generous mood.

"Sure. Show me someone else who could've done that, and I'll admit that maybe I'm wrong."

"Skeel could have done it, Sergeant. And he did do it—without anyone knowing it"

"Skeel!—This ain't the age of miracles, Mr. Vance."

Vance swung about and faced Markham.

"Listen! I'm telling you Jessup's innocent." He spoke with a fervour that amazed me. "And I'm going to prove it to you—some way. My theory is pretty complete; it's deficient only in one or two small points; and, I'll confess, I haven't yet been able to put a name to the culprit. But it's the right theory, Markham, and it's diametrically opposed to the Sergeant's. Therefore, you've got to give me an opportunity to demonstrate it before you proceed against Jessup. Now, I can't demonstrate it here; so you and Heath must come with me to the Odell house. It won't take over an hour. But if it took a week, you'd have to come just the same." He stepped near to the desk.

"I know that it was Skeel, and not Jessup, who unbolted that door before the crime, and rebolted it afterward."

Markham was impressed.

"You know this— you know it for a fact?"

"Yes! And I know how he did it!"

Chapter XXV

VANCE DEMONSTRATES

(Monday, September 17th ; 11.30 a m.)

HALF an hour later we entered the little apartment-house in 71st Street. Despite the plausibility of Heath's case against Jessup, Markham was not entirely satisfied with the arrest ; and Vance's attitude had sown further seeds of doubt in his mind. The strongest point against Jessup was that relating to the bolting and unbolting of the side door ; and when Vance had asserted that he was able to demonstrate how Skeel could have manipulated his own entrance and exit, Markham, though only partly convinced, had agreed to accompany him. Heath, too, was interested, and, though supercilious, had expressed a willingness to go along.

Spively, scintillant in his chocolate coloured suit, was at the switchboard, and stared at us apprehensively. But when Vance suggested pleasantly that he take a ten-minute walk round the block, he appeared greatly relieved, and lost no time in complying.

The officer on guard outside of the Odell apartment came forward and saluted.

"How goes it ?" asked Heath. "Any visitors ?"

"Only one— a toff who said he'd known the Canary and wanted to see the apartment. I told him to get an order from you or the District Attorney."

"That was correct, officer," said Markham ; then, turning to Vance : "Probably Spotswoode—poor devil."

"Quite," murmured Vance. "So persistent! Rosemary and all the . . . Touchin'."

Heath told the officer to go for a half-hour's stroll ; and we were left alone.

"And now, Sergeant," said Vance cheerfully, "I'm sure you know how to operate a switchboard. Be so kind as to act as Spively's understudy for a few minutes—there's a good fellow. . . . But, first, please bolt the side door—and be sure that you bolt it securely, just as it was on the fatal night."

Heath grinned good-naturedly.

"Sure thing." He put his forefinger to his lips mysteriously, and, crouching, tiptoed down the hall like a burlesque detective in a farce. After a few moments he came tiptoeing back to the switchboard, his finger still on his lips. Then, glancing surreptitiously about him with globular ears, he put his mouth to Vance's ear.

"His-s-s-t!" he whispered. "The door's bolted. G-r-r-r . . ." He sat down at the switchboard. "When does the curtain go up, Mr. Vance?"

"It's up, Sergeant." Vance fell in with Heath's jocular mood. "Behold! The hour is half-past nine on Monday night. You are Spively—not nearly so elegant, and you forgot the moustache—but still Spively. And I am the bedizened Skeel. For the sake of realism, please try to imagine me in chamois gloves and a pleated silk shirt. Mr. Markham and Mr. Van Dine here represent 'the many-headed monster of the pit'—And, by the by, Sergeant, let me have the key to the Odell apartment: Skeel had one, don't y' know."

Heath produced the key, and handed it over still grinning.

"A word of stage-direction," Vance continued. "When I have departed by the front door, you are to wait exactly three minutes, and then knock at the late Canary's apartment."

He sauntered to the front door and, turning, walked back toward the switchboard. Markham and I stood behind Heath in the little alcove, facing the front of the building.

"Enter Mr. Skeel!" announced Vance. "Remember, it's half-past nine." Then, as he came abreast of the switchboard: "Dash it all! You forgot your lines,

Sergeant. You should have told me that Miss Odell was out. But it doesn't matter. . . . Mr. Skeel continues to the lady's door . . . thus."

He walked past us, and we heard him ring the apartment bell. After a brief pause, he knocked on the door. Then he came back down the hall.

"I guess you were right," he said, quoting the words of Skeel as reported by Spively; and went on to the front door. Stepping out into the street, he turned toward Broadway.

For exactly three minutes we waited. None of us spoke, Heath had become serious, and his accelerated puffing on his cigar bore evidence of his state of expectancy. Markham was frowning stoically. At the end of the three minutes Heath rose and hurried up the hall, with Markham and me at his heels. In answer to his knock, the apartment door was opened from the inside. Vance was standing in the little foyer.

"The end of the first act," he greeted us airily. "Thus did Mr. Skeel enter the lady's boudoir Monday night after the side door had been bolted, without the operator's seeing him."

Heath narrowed his eyes, but said nothing. Then he suddenly swung round and looked down the rear passage-way to the oak door at the end. The handle of the bolt was in a vertical position, showing that the catch had been turned and that the door was unbolted. Heath regarded it for several moments; then he turned his eyes toward the switchboard. Presently he let out a gleeful whoop.

"Very good, Mr. Vance—very good!" he proclaimed, nodding his head knowingly. "That was easy, though. And it don't take psychology to explain it.—After you rang the apartment bell, you ran down this rear hallway and unbolted the door. Then you ran back and knocked. After that you went out the front entrance, turned toward Broadway, swung round across the street, came in the alley, walked in the side door, and quietly let yourself into the apartment behind our backs."

"Simple, wasn't it?" agreed Vance.

"Sure." The Sergeant was almost contemptuous. "But that don't get you nowhere. Anybody could've figured it out if that had been the only problem connected with Monday night's operations. But it's the rebolting of that side door, after Skeel had gone, that's been occupying my mind. Skeel might've—*might've*, mind you—got in the way you did. But he couldn't have got out that way, because the door was bolted the next morning. And if there was someone here to bolt the door after him, then that same person could've unbolted the door for him earlier, without his doing the ten-foot dash down the rear hall to unbolt the door himself at half-past nine. So I don't see that your interesting little drama helps Jessup out any."

"Oh, but the drama isn't over," Vance replied. "The curtain is about to go up on the next act."

Heath lifted his eyes sharply.

"Yeah?" His tone was one of almost jeering incredulity, but his expression was searching and dubious. "And you're going to show us how Skeel got out and bolted the door on the inside without Jessup's help?"

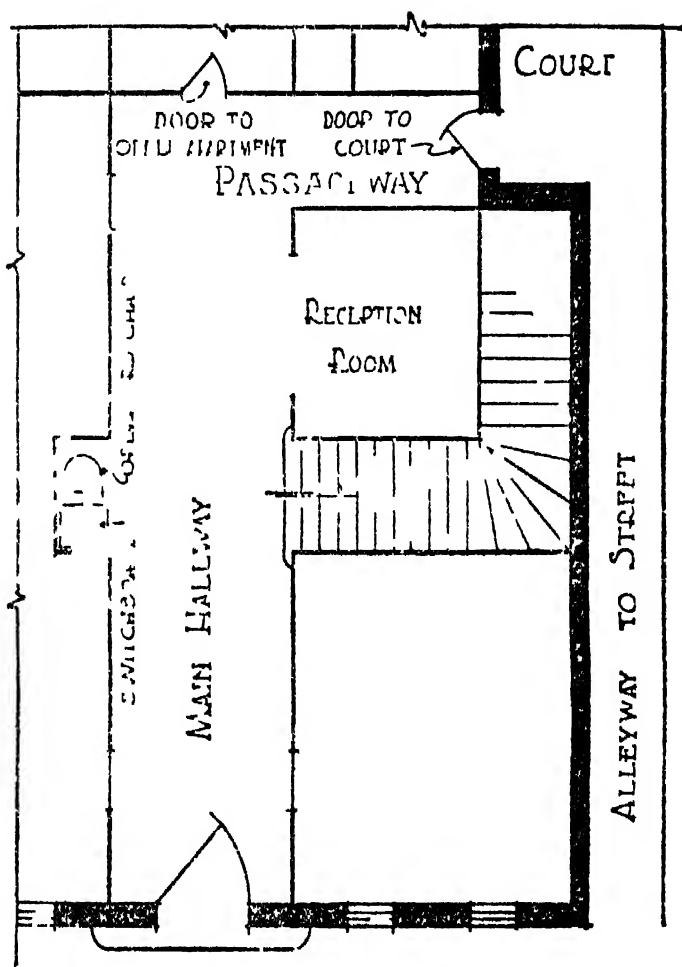
"That is precisely what I intend to do, my Sergeant."

Heath opened his mouth to speak, but thought better of it. Instead, he merely shrugged his shoulders and gave Markham a sly look.

"Let us repair to the public atrium," proceeded Vance; and he led us into the little reception-room diagonally opposite to the switchboard. This room, as I have explained, was just beyond the staircase, and along its rear wall ran the little passageway to the side door. (A glance at the accompanying diagram will clarify the arrangement.)

Vance shepherded us ceremoniously to chairs, and cocked his eye at the Sergeant.

"You will be so good as to rest here until you hear me knock at the side door. Then come and open it for me." He went toward the archway. "Once more I personate the departed Mr. Skeel; so picture me again *en grande*



WEST SEVENTY-FIRST STREET

tenue—sartorially radiant. . . . The curtain ascends."

He bowed and, stepping from the reception-room into the main hall, disappeared round the corner into the rear passageway.

Heath shifted his position restlessly and gave Markham a questioning, troubled look.

"Will he pull it off, sir, do you think?" All jocularitv had gone out of his tone.

"I can't see how," Markham was scowling. "If he does, though, it will knock the chief underpinning from your theory of Jessup's guilt."

"I'm not worrying," declared Heath. "Mr. Vance knows a lot; he's got ideas. But how in hell——?"

He was interrupted by a loud knocking on the side door. The three of us sprang up simultaneously and hurried round the corner of the main hall. The rear passageway was empty. There was no door or aperture of any kind on either side of it. It consisted of two blank walls; and at the end, occupying almost its entire width, was the oak door which led to the court. Vance could have disappeared only through that oak door. And the thing we all noticed at once—for our eyes had immediately sought it—was the horizontal position of the bolt-handle. This meant that the door was bolted.

Heath was not merely astonished—he was dumbfounded. Markham had halted abruptly, and stood staring down the empty passageway as if he saw a ghost. After a momentary hesitation Heath walked rapidly to the door. But he did not open it at once. He went down on his knees before the lock and scrutinised the bolt carefully. Then he took out his pocket-knife and inserted the blade into the crack between the door and the casing. The point halted against the inner moulding, and the edge of the blade scraped upon the circular bolt. There was no question that the heavy oak casings and mouldings of the door were solid and well fitted, and that the bolt had been securely thrown from the inside. Heath, however, was still suspicious, and,

grasping the door-knob, he tugged at it violently. But the door held firmly. At length he threw the bolt-handle to a vertical position and opened the door. Vance was standing in the court, placidly smoking and inspecting the brickwork of the alley wall.

"I say, Markham," he remarked, "here's a curious thing. This wall, d' ye know, must be very old. It wasn't built in these latter days of breathless efficiency. The beauty-loving mason who erected it laid the bricks in Flemish bond instead of the Running—or Stretcher—bond of our own restless age. And up there a bit"—he pointed toward the rear yard—"is a Rowlock and Checkerboard pattern. Very neat and very pretty—more pleasing even than the popular English Cross bond. And the mortar joints are all V-tooled. . . . Fancy!"

Markham was fuming.

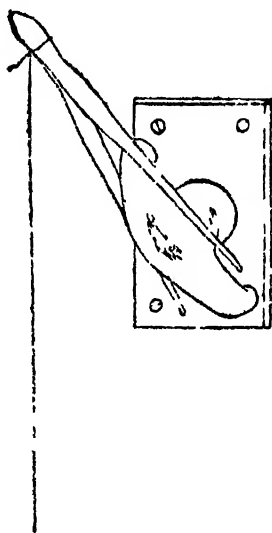
"Damn it, Vance! I'm not building brick walls. What I want to know is how you got out here and left the door bolted on the inside."

"Oh, that!" Vance crushed out his cigarette and re-entered the building. "I merely made use of a bit of clever criminal mechanism. It's very simple, like all truly effective appliances—oh, simple beyond words. I blush at its simplicity. . . . Observe!"

He took from his pocket a tiny pair of tweezers to the end of which was tied a piece of purple twine about four feet long. Placing the tweezers over the vertical bolt-handle, he turned them at a very slight angle to the left and then ran the twine under the door so that about a foot of it projected over the sill. Stepping into the court, he closed the door. The tweezers still held the bolt-handle as in a vice, and the string extended straight to the floor and disappeared under the door into the court. The three of us stood watching the bolt with fascinated attention. Slowly the string became taut, as Vance gently pulled upon the loose end outside, and then the downward tug began slowly but surely to turn the bolt-handle. When

the bolt had been thrown and the handle was in a horizontal position, there came a slight jerk on the string. The tweezers were disengaged from the bolt-handle, and fell noiselessly to the carpeted floor. Then as the string was pulled from without, the tweezers disappeared under the crack between the bottom of the door and the sill.

"Childish, what?" commented Vance, when Heath had let him in. "Silly, too, isn't it? And yet, Sergeant dear, that's how the deceased Tony left these premises last



Monday night. . . . But let's go into the lady's apartment, and I'll tell you a story. I see that Mr. Spively has returned from his promenade; so he can resume his telephonic duties and leave us free for a *causerie*."

"When did you think up that locus-pocus with the tweezers and string?" demanded Markham irritably, when we were seated in the Odell living-room.

"I didn't think it up at all, don't y' know," Vance told

him carelessly, selecting a cigarette with annoying deliberation. "It was Mr. Skeel's idea. Ingenious lad—eh, what?"

"Come, come!" Markham's equanimity was at last shaken. "How can you possibly know that Skeel used this means of locking himself out?"

"I found the little apparatus in his evening clothes yesterday morning."

"What!" cried Heath belligerently. "You took that out of Skeel's room yesterday, during the search, without saying anything about it?"

"Oh, only after your ferrets had passed it by. In fact, I didn't even look at the gentleman's clothes until your experienced searchers had inspected them and relocked the wardrobe door. Y' see, Sergeant, this little thungumbob was stuffed away in one of the pockets of Skeel's dress waistcoat, under the silver cigarette case. I'll admit I went over his evening suit rather lovin'ly. He wore it, y' know, on the night the lady departed this life, and I hoped to find some slight indication of his collusion in the event. When I found this little eyebrow plucker, I hadn't the slightest intling of its significance. And the purple twine attached to it bothered me mightily, don't y' know. I could see that Mr. Skeel didn't pluck his eyebrows; and even if he had been addicted to the practice, why the twine? The tweezers are a delicate little gold affair—just what the ravishin' Margaret might have used; and last Tuesday morning I noticed a small lacquer tray containing similar toilet accessories on his dressing-table near the jewel-case. —But that wasn't all."

He pointed to the little velvet waste basket beside the escritoire, in which lay a large crumpled mass of heavy paper.

"I also noticed that piece of discarded wrapping-paper stamped with the name of a well known Fifth Avenue novelty shop; and this morning, on my way down-town, I dropped in at the shop and learned that they make a practice of tying up their bundles with purple twine.

Therefore, I concluded that Skeel had taken the tweezers and the twine from this apartment during his visit here that eventful night. . . . Now, the question was: Why should he have spent his time tying strings to eyebrow-pluckers? I confess, with maidenly modesty, that I couldn't find an answer. But this morning when you told of arresting Jessup, and emphasised the rebolting of the side door after Skeel's departure, the fog lifted, the sun shone, the birds began to sing. I became suddenly mediumistic: I had a psychic seizure. The whole *modus operandi* came to me—as they say—in a flash. . . . I told you, Markham old thing, it would take spiritualism to solve this case."

Chapter XXVI

RECONSTRUCTING THE CRIME

(Monday, September 17th ; noon)

WHEN Vance finished speaking, there was several minutes' silence. Markham sat deep in his chair glaring into space. Heath, however, was watching Vance with a kind of grudging admiration. The corner-stone in the foundation of his case against Jessup had been knocked out, and the structure he had built was tottering precariously. Markham realised this, and the fact played havoc with his hopes.

"I wish your inspirations were more helpful," he grumbled, turning his gaze upon Vance. "This latest revelation of yours puts us back almost to where we started from."

"Oh, don't be pessimistic. Let us face the future with a bright eye. . . . Want to hear my theory?—it's fairly bulging with possibilities." He arranged himself comfortably in his chair. "Skeel needed money—no doubt his silk shirts were running low—and after his unsuccessful attempt to extort it from the lady a week before her demise, he came here last Monday night. He had learned she would be out, and he intended to wait for her; for she had probably refused to receive him in the custom'ry social way. He knew the side door was bolted at night, and, as he didn't want to be seen entering the apartment, he devised the little scheme of unbolting the door for himself under cover of a futile call at half-past nine. The unbolting accomplished, he returned *via* the alleyway, and let himself into the apartment at some time before eleven. When the lady returned with an escort, he quickly hid in the clothes-closet, and re-

mained there until the escort had departed. Then he came forth, and the lady, startled by his sudden appearance, screamed. But, on recognising him, she told Spotswoode, who was now hammering at the door, that it was all a mistake. So Spotswoode ran along and played poker. A financial discussion between Skeel and the lady—probably a highly acrimonious tiff—ensued. In the midst of it the telephone rang, and Skeel snatched off the receiver and said the Canary was out. The tiff was resumed; but presently another suitor appeared on the scene. Whether he rung the bell or let himself in with a key I can't say—probably the latter, for the phone operator was unaware of his visit. Skeel hid himself a second time in the closet, and luckily took the precaution of locking himself in. Also, he quite naturally put his eye to the keyhole to see who the second intruder was."

Vance pointed to the closet door.

"The keyhole, you will observe, is on a line with the dayenport; and as Skeel peered out into the room he saw a sight that froze his blood. The new arrival—in the midst perhaps of some entreating sentence—seized the lady by the throat and proceeded to throttle her. . . . Imagine Skeel's emotions, my dear Markham. There he was, crouching in a dark closet, and a few feet from him stood a murderer in the act of strangling a lady! *Poore Anonyme!* I don't wonder he was petrified and speechless. He saw what he imagined to be maniacal fury in the strangler's eyes; and the stranger must have been a fairly powerful creature, whereas Skeel was slender and almost undersized. . . . No, *merci*. Skeel wasn't having any. He lay doggo. And I can't say that I blame the beggar, what?"

He made a gesture of interrogation.

"What did the strangler do next? Well, well—we'll probably never know, now that Skeel, the horrified witness, has gone to his Maker. But I rather imagine he got out that black document-box, opened it with a key he had taken from the lady's hand-bag, and extracted a goodly number

of incriminating documents. Then, I fancy, the fireworks began. The gentleman proceeded to wreck the apartment in order to give the effect of a professional burglary. He tore the lace on the lady's gown and severed the shoulder-strap; snatched her orchid corsage and threw it in her lap; stripped off her rings and bracelets; and tore the pendant from its chain. After that he upset the lamp, rified the *escritoire*, ransacked the Boule cabinet, broke the mirror, overturned the chairs, tore the draperies. . . . And all the time Skeel kept his eye glued to the key hole with fascinated horror, afraid to move, terrified lest he be discovered and sent to join his erstwhile *mamoreta*, for by now he was no doubt thoroughly convinced that the man outside was a raving lunatic.—I can't say that I envy Skeel his predicament: it was ticklish, y' know. Rather!—And the devastation went on. He could hear it even when the operations had passed from out his radius of vision. And he himself was caught like a rat in a trap, with no means of escape. A harrowin' situation—my word!"

Vance smoked a moment, and then shifted his position slightly.

"Y' know, Markham, I imagine that the worst moment in the whole of Skeel's checkered career came when that mysterious wrecker tried to open the closet door behind which he was crouching. Fancy! There he was cornered, and not two inches from him stood, apparently, a homicidal maniac trying to get to him, rattling the thin barricade of white pine. . . . Can you picture the blighter's relief when the murderer finally released the knob and turned away? It's a wonder he didn't collapse from the reaction. But he didn't. He listened and watched in a sort of hypnotic panic, until he heard the invader leave the apartment. Then, weak-kneed and in a cold sweat, he came forth and surveyed the battlefield."

Vance glanced about him.

"Not a pretty sight—eh, what? And there on the davenport reclined the lady's strangled body. That corpse was

Skeel's dominant horror. He staggered to the table to look at it, and steadied himself with his right hand—that's how you got your finger-prints, Sergeant. Then the realisation of his own position suddenly smote him. Here he was alone with a murdered person. He was known to have been intimate with the lady; and he was a burglar with a record. Who would believe that he was innocent? And though he had probably recognised the man who had negotiated the business, he was in no position to tell his story. Everything was against him—his sneaking in, his presence in the house at half-past nine, his relations with the girl, his profession, his reputation. He hadn't a chance in the world. . . . I say, Markham, would *you* have credited his tale?"

"Never mind that," retorted Markham. "Go on with your theory." He and Heath had been listening with rapt interest.

"My theory from this point on," resumed Vance, "is what you might term self-developing. It proceeds on its own inertia, so to speak—Skeel was confronted by the urgent problem of getting away and covering up his tracks. His mind in this emergency became keen and highly active: his life was forfeit if he didn't succeed. He began to think furiously. He could have left by the side door at once without being seen; but then, the door would have been found unbolted. And this fact, taken in connection with his earlier visit that night, would have suggested his manner of unbolting the door. . . . No, that method of escape wouldn't do—decidedly it wouldn't do. He knew he was likely, in any event, to be suspected of the murder, in view of his shady association with the lady and his general character. Motive, place, opportunity, time, means, conduct, and his own record—all were against him. Either he must cover up his tracks, don't y' know, or else his career as a Lothario was at an end. A sweet dilemma! He realised, of course, that if he could get out and leave that side door bolted on the inside, he'd be comparatively safe. No one could then explain how he had come in or gone out. It would establish

his only possible alibi—a negative one, to be sure; but, with a good lawyer, he could probably make it hold. Doubtless he searched for other means of escape, but found himself confronted with obstacles on every hand. The side door was his only hope. How could it be worked? ”

Vance rose and yawned.

“That’s my caressin’ theory. Skeel was caught in a trap, and with his shrewd, tricky brain he figured his way out. He may have roamed up and down these two rooms for hours before he hit on his plan; and it’s not unlikely that he appealed to the Deity with an occasional ‘Oh, my God!’ As for his using the tweezers, I’m inclined to think the mechanism of the idea came to him almost immediately.—Y’ know, Sergeant, this locking of a door on the inside is an old trick. There are any number of recorded cases of it in the criminal literature of Europe. Indeed, in Professor Hans Gross’s handbook of criminology there’s a whole chapter on the devices used by burglars for illegal entries and exits.¹ But all such devices have had to do with the locking— not the bolting of doors. The principle, of course, is the same, but the technic is different. To lock a door on the inside, a needle, or strong slender pin, is inserted through the bow of the key, and pulled downward with a string. But on the side door of this house there is no lock and key; nor is there a bow in the bolt handle.— Now, the resourceful Skeel, while pacing nervously about, looking for something that might offer a suggestion, probably espied the tweezers on the lady’s dressing-table— no lady nowadays is without these little eyebrow-pluckers, don’t y’ know—and immediately his problem was solved. It remained only to test the device. Before departing, however, he chiselled open the jewel-case which the other chap had merely dinted, and found the solitaire diamond ring that he later attempted to pawn. Then he crased, as he thought, all his finger-prints, forgetting to wipe off the inside door-

¹ The treatise referred to by Vance was *Handbuch für Untersuchungsrichter als System der Kriminalistik*

knob of the closet, and overlooking the hand-mark on the table. After that, he let himself out quietly and rebolted the side door the same as I did, stuffing the tweezers in his waistcoat pocket and forgetting them."

Heath nodded his head oracularly.

"A crook, no matter how clever he is, always overlooks something."

"Why single out crooks for your criticism, Sergeant?" asked Vance lively. "Do you know of anybody in this imperfect world who doesn't always overlook something?" He gave Heath a benignant smile. "Even the police, I don't know, overlooked the tweezers."

Heath grunted. His cigar had gone out, and he relighted it slowly and thoroughly.

"What do you think, Mr. Marlham?"

"The situation doesn't become much clearer," was Marlham's gloomy comment.

"My theory isn't exactly a blinding illumination," said Vance. "Yet I wouldn't say that it left things in absolute darkness. There are certain inferences to be drawn from my vagaries. To wit: Steel either knew or recognized the murderer, and once he had made good his escape from the apartment and had regained a modicum of self-confidence, he undoubtedly had indulged in hornadal conduct. His death was merely another manifestation of our *infernal* bent for ridding himself of persons who annoyed him. Furthermore, my theory accounts for the chilled jewel-case, the finger-prints, the unbolsted closet, the finding of the gems in the refuse bin—the person who took them really didn't want them, y' know—and Steel's silence. It also explains the unbolting and bolting of the side door."

"Ye," sighed Marlham. "It seems to clarify everything but the one all-important point—the identity of the murderer."

"Exactly," said Vance. "Let's go to lunch."

Heath morose and confused, departed for Police Headquarters; and Marlham, Vance, and I rode to Delmonico's,

where we chose the main dining-room in preference to the grill.

"The case now would seem to centre in Cleaver and Mannix," said Markham, when we had finished our luncheon. "If your theory that the same man killed both Skeel and the Canary is correct, then Lindquist is out of it, for he certainly was in the Episcopal Hospital Saturday night."

"Quite," agreed Vance. "The doctor is unquestionably eliminated. . . . Yes; Cleaver and Mannix—they're the all-in twins. Don't see any way to go beyond them." He frowned and sipped his coffee. "My original quartet is dwindling, and I don't like it. It narrows the thing down too much—there's no scope for the mind, as it were, in only two choices. What if we should succeed in eliminating Cleaver and Mannix? Where would we be then, what? Nowhere,—simply nowhere. And yet, one of the quartet is guilty; let's cling to that consolatory fact. It can't be Spotswood and it can't be Lindquist. Cleaver and Mannix remain—two from four leaves two. Simple arithmetic, what? The only trouble is, this case isn't simple. Lord, no!—I say, how would the equation work out if we used algebra, or spherical trigonometry, or differential calculus? Let's cast it in the fourth dimension—or the fifth, or the sixth. . . ." He held his temples in both hands. "Oh, promise, Markham—promise me that you'll have a kind, gentle keeper for me."

"I know how you feel. I've been in the same mental state for a week."

"It's the quartet idea that's driving me mad," raved Vance. "It wings me to have my terrified, jugged off in such brutal fashion. I'd set my young to strangle them on that quartet, and now it's only a pair. Measure of order and proportion has been outraged. . . . I want my quartet."

"I'm afraid you'll have to be satisfied with two or them," Markham returned wearily. "One of them can't qualify, and one is in bed. You might send some flowers to the hospital, if it would cheer you any."

"One is in bed—one is in bed," repeated Vance. "Well, well—to be sure! And one from four leaves three. More arithmetic. Three! . . . On the other hand, there is no such thing as a straight line. All lines are curved, they transcribe circles in space. They look straight, but they're not. Appearances, y' know,—so deceptive! . . . Let's enter the silence, and substitute mentation for sight."

He gazed up out of the great windows into Fifth Avenue. For several moments he sat smoking thoughtfully. When he spoke again, it was in an even, deliberate voice.

"Markham, would it be difficult for you to invite Mannix and Cleaver and Spotswoode to spend an evening—this evening, let us say—in your apartment?"

Markham set down his cup with a clatter, and regarded Vance narrowly.

"What new harlequinade is this?"

"Fie on you! Answer my question."

"Well—of course—I might arrange it," replied Markham hesitatingly. "They're all more or less under my jurisdiction at present."

"So that such an invitation would be rather in line with the situation—eh, what? And they wouldn't be likely to refuse you, old dear—would they?"

"No; I hardly think so. . . ."

"And if, when they had assembled in your quarters, you should propose a few hands of poker, they'd probably accept, without thinking the suggestion strange?"

"Probably," said Markham, nonplussed at Vance's amazing request. "Cleaver and Spotswoode both play, I know, and Mannix doubtless knows the game. But why poker? Are you serious, or has your threatened dementia already overtaken you?" *

"Oh, I'm deuced serious." Vance's tone left no doubt as to the fact. "The game of poker, d' ye see, is the crux of the matter. I knew Cleaver was an old hand at the game; and Spotswoode, of course, played with Judge Redfern last

Monday night. So that gave me a basis for my plan. Man-nix, we'll assume, also plays."

He leaned forward, speaking earnestly.

"Nine-tenths of poker, Markham, is psychology; and if one understands the game, one can learn more of a man's inner nature at a poker table in an hour than during a year's casual association with him. You rallied me once when I said I could lead you to the perpetrator of any crime by examining the factors of the crime itself. But naturally I must know the man to whom I am to lead you; otherwise I cannot relate the psychological indications of the crime to the culprit's nature. In the present case, I know the kind of man who committed the crime; but I am not sufficiently acquainted with the suspects to point out the guilty one. However, after our game of poker, I hope to be able to tell you who planned and carried out the Canary's murder."

Markham gazed at him in blank astonishment. He knew that Vance played poker with amazing skill, and that he possessed an uncanny knowledge of the psychological elements involved in the game; but he was unprepared for the latter's statement that he might be able to solve the Odell murder by means of it. Yet Vance had spoken with such undoubted earnestness that Markham was impressed. I knew what was passing in his mind almost as well as if he had voiced his thoughts. He was recalling the way in which Vance had, in a former murder case, put his finger un-

¹ Recently I ran across an article by Doctor George A. Dorsey, professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago, and author of "Why We Act Like Human Beings," which bore intimate testimony to the scientific accuracy of Vance's theory. In it Doctor Dorsey said. "Poker is a cross-section of life. The way a man behaves in a poker game is the way he behaves in life. . . . His success or failure lies in the way his physical organism responds to the stimuli supplied by the game. . . . I have studied humanity all my life from the anthropologic and psychological view-point. And I have yet to find a better laboratory exercise than to observe the manners of men as they see my raise and come back at me. . . . The psychologist's verbalised, visceral, and manual behaviours are functioning at their highest in a poker game. . . . I can truthfully say that I learned about men from poker."

erringly on the guilty man by a similar process of psychological deduction. And he was also telling himself that, however incomprehensible and seemingly extravagant Vance's requests were, there was always a fundamentally sound reason behind them.

"Damn it!" he muttered at last. "The whole scheme seems idiotic. . . . And yet, if you really want a game of poker with these men, I've no special objection. It'll get you nowhere—I'll tell you that beforehand. It's stark nonsense to suppose that you can find the guilty man by such fantastic means."

"Ah, well," sighed Vance, "a little futile recreation will do us no harm."

"But why do you include Spotswoode?"

"Really, y' know, I haven't the slightest notion—except of course, that he's one of my quartet. And we'll need an extra hand."

"Well, don't tell me afterwards that I'm to lock him up for murder. I'd have to draw the line. Strange as it may seem to your layman's mind, I wouldn't care to prosecute a man, knowing that it was physically impossible for him to have committed the crime."

"As to that," drawled Vance, "the only obstacle that stand in the way of physical impossibilities are material facts. And material facts are notoriously deceivin'. Really, y' know, you lawyers would do better if you ignored them entirely."

Markham did not deign to answer such heresy, but the look he gave Vance was most expressive.

Chapter XXVII

A GAME OF POKER

(Monday, September 17th ; 9 a.m.)

VANCE and I went home after lunch, and at about four o'clock Markham telephoned to say that he had made the necessary arrangements for the evening with Spotswoode, Mannix, and Cleaver. Immediately following this confirmation Vance left the house, and did not return until nearly eight o'clock. Though I was filled with curiosity at so unusual a proceeding, he refused to enlighten me. But when, at a quarter to nine, we went downstairs to the waiting car, there was a man I did not know in the tonneau ; and I at once connected him with Vance's mysterious absence.

"I've asked Mr. Allen to join us to-night," Vance vouchsafed, when he had introduced us. "You don't play poker, and we really need another hand to make the game interesting, y' know. Mr. Allen, by the bye, is an old antagonist of mine."

The fact that Vance would, apparently without permission, bring an uninvited guest to Markham's apartment amazed me but little more than the appearance of the man himself. He was rather short, with sharp, shrewd features ; and what I saw of his hair beneath his jauntily tipped hat was black and sleek, like the painted hair on Japanese dolls. I noted, too, that his evening tie was enlivened by a design of tiny white forget-me-nots, and that his shirt-front was adorned with diamond studs.

The contrast between him and the immaculately stylish and meticulously correct Vance was aggressively evident.

I wondered what could be the relationship between them. Obviously it was neither social nor intellectual.

Cleaver and Mannix were already on hand when we were ushered into Markham's drawing-room, and a few minutes later Spotswoode arrived. The amenities of introduction over, we were soon seated comfortably about the open log fire, smoking, and sipping very excellent Scotch high balls. Markham had, of course, accepted the unexpected Mr. Allen cordially, but his occasional glances in the latter's direction told me he was having some difficulty in reconciling the man's appearance with Vance's sponsorship.

A tense atmosphere lay beneath the spurious and affected affability of the little gathering. Indeed, the situation was scarcely conducive to spontaneity. Here were three men each of whom was known to the others to have been interested in the same woman; and the reason for their having been brought together was the fact that this woman had been murdered. Markham, however, handled the situation with such tact that he largely succeeded in giving each one the feeling of being a disinterested spectator summoned to discuss an abstract problem. He explained at the outset that the "conference" had been actuated by his failure to find any approach to the problem of the murder. He hoped, he said, by a purely informal discussion, divested of all officialism and coercion, to turn up some suggestion that might lead to a fruitful line of inquiry. His manner was one of friendly appeal, and when he finished speaking the general tension had been noticeably relaxed.

During the discussion that followed I was interested in the various attitudes of the men concerned. Cleaver spoke bitterly of his part in the affair, and was more self-condemnatory than suggestive. Mannix was voluble and pretentiously candid, but beneath his comments ran a strain of apologetic wariness. Spotswoode, unlike Mannix, seemed loath to discuss the matter, and maintained a consistently reticent attitude. He responded politely to Markham's questions, but he did not succeed entirely in hiding his

resentment at thus being dragged into a general discussion. Vance had little to say, limiting himself to occasional remarks directed always to Markham. Allen did not once speak, but sat contemplating the others with a sort of canny amusement.

The entire conversation struck me as utterly futile. Had Markham really hoped to garner information from it, he would have been woefully disappointed. I realised, though, that he was merely endeavouring to justify himself for having taken so unusual a step, and to pave the way for the game of poker which Vance had requested. When the time came to broach the subject, however, there was no difficulty about it.

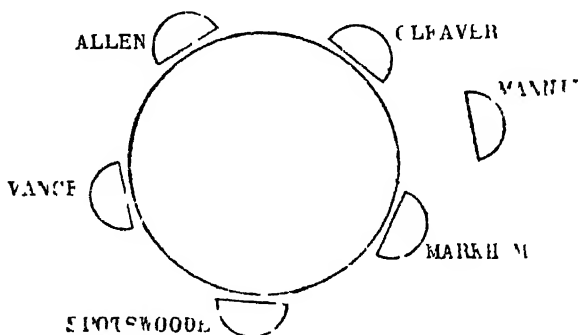
It was exactly eleven o'clock when he made the suggestion. His tone was gracious and unassuming; but by couching his invitation in terms of a personal request, he practically precluded declination. But his verbal strategy, I felt, was unnecessary. Both Cleaver and Spotswoode seemed genuinely to welcome the opportunity of dropping a distasteful discussion in favour of playing cards; and Vance and Allen, of course, concurred instantly. Mannix alone declined. He explained that he knew the game only slightly, and disliked it; though he expressed an enthusiastic desire to watch the others. Vance urged him to reconsider, but without success; and Markham finally ordered his man to arrange the table for five.

I noticed that Vance waited until Allen had taken his place, and then dropped into the chair at his right. Cleaver took the seat at Allen's left. Spotswoode sat at Vance's right; and then came Markham. Mannix drew up his chair midway behind Markham and Cleaver. [See next page]

Cleaver first named a rather moderate limit, but Spotswoode at once suggested much larger stakes. Then Vance went still higher, and as both Markham and Allen signified their agreement, his figure was accepted. The prices placed on the chips somewhat took my breath away, and even Mannix whistled softly.

That all five men at the table were excellent players became obvious before the game had progressed ten minutes. For the first time that night Vance's friend Allen seemed to have found his *milieu* and to be wholly at ease.

Allen won the first two hands, and Vance the third and fourth. Spotswoode then had a short run of good luck, and a little later Markham took a large jack-pot which put him slightly in the lead. Cleaver was the only loser thus far; but in another half hour he had succeeded in recovering a large portion of his losses. After that Vance forged steadily ahead, only to relinquish his winning streak to Allen. Then for a while the fortunes of the game were



rather evenly distributed. But later on both Cleaver and Spotswoode began to lose heavily. By half past twelve a grim atmosphere had settled over the party, for so high were the stakes, and so equal, did the betting pyramid, that even for men of means—such as all these players undoubtedly were—the amounts which continually changed hands represented very considerable items.

Just before one o'clock, when the fever of the game had reached a high point, I saw Vance glance quickly at Allen and pass his handkerchief across his forehead. To a stranger the gesture would have been perfectly natural; but, so

familiar was I with Vance's mannerisms, I immediately recognised its artificiality. And simultaneously I noticed that it was Allen who was shuffling the cards preparatory to dealing. Some smoke from his cigar evidently went into his eye at this moment, for he blinked, and one of the cards fell to the floor. Quickly retrieving it, he reshuffled the deck and placed it before Vance to cut.

The hand was a jack-pot, and there was a small fortune in chips already on the table. Cleaver, Markham and Spotswoode passed. The decision thus reached Vance, and he opened for an unusually large amount. Allen at once laid down his hand, but Cleaver stayed. Then Markham and Spotswoode both dropped out, leaving the entire play between Vance and Cleaver. Cleaver drew one card, and Vance, who had opened, drew two. Vance made a nominal wager, and Cleaver raised it substantially. Vance in turn raised Cleaver, but only for a small amount; and Cleaver again raised Vance—this time for an even larger sum than before. Vance hesitated, and called him. Cleaver exposed his hand triumphantly.

"Straight flush—jack high," he announced. "Can you beat that?"

"Not on a two-card draw," said Vance ruefully. He put his cards down to show his openers. He had four kings.

About half an hour later Vance again took out his handkerchief and passed it across his forehead. As before, I noted that it was Allen's deal, and also that the hand was a jack-pot which had been twice sweetened. Allen paused to take a drink of his high-ball and to light his cigar. Then, after Vance had cut the cards, he dealt them.

Cleaver, Markham and Spotswoode passed, and again Vance opened, for the full amount of the pot. No one stayed except Spotswoode; and this time it was a struggle solely between him and Vance. Spotswoode asked for one card; and Vance stood pat. Then there followed a moment of almost breathless silence. The atmosphere seemed to me to be electrically charged, and I think the others sensed

it too, for they were watching the play with a curiously strained intentness. Vance and Spotswoode, however, appeared frozen in attitudes of superlative calm. I watched them closely, but neither revealed the slightest indication of any emotion.

It was Vance's first bet. Without speaking he moved a stack of yellow chips to the centre of the table—it was by far the largest wager that had been made during the game. But immediately Spotswoode measured another stack alongside of it. Then he coolly and deftly counted the remainder of his chips, and pushed them all forward with the palm of his hand, saying quietly :

"The limit."

Vance shrugged almost imperceptibly.

"The pot, sir, is yours." He smiled pleasantly at Spotswoode, and put down his hand face up, to establish his openers. He had held four aces!

"Gad! That's poker!" exclaimed Allen, chuckling.

"Poker?" echoed Markham. "To lay down four aces with all that money at stake?"

Cleaver also grunted his astonishment, and Mannix pursed his lips disgustedly.

"I don't mean any offence, y' understand, Mr Vance," he said. "But looking at that play from a strictly business standpoint, I'd say you quit too soon."

Spotswoode glanced up

"You gentlemen wrong Mr. Vance," he said. "He played his hand perfectly. His withdrawal, even with four aces, was scientifically correct."

"Sure it was," agreed Allen. "Oh, boy! What a battle that was!"

Spotswoode nodded and, turning to Vance, said :

"Since the exact situation is never likely to occur again, the least I can do, by way of showing my appreciation of your remarkable perception, is to gratify your curiosity.—I held nothing."

Spotswoode put down his hand and extended his fingers

gracefully towards the upturned cards. There were revealed a five, six, seven, and eight of clubs, and a knave of hearts.

"I can't say that I follow your reasoning, Mr. Spotswoode," Markham confessed. "Mr. Vance had you beaten—and he quit."

"Consider the situation," Spotswoode replied, in a suave, even voice. "I most certainly would have opened so rich a pot, had I been able to, after Mr. Cleaver and you had passed. But since I nevertheless stayed after Mr. Vance had opened for so large an amount, it goes without saying that I must have had either a four-straight, a four-flush, or a four-straight-flush. I believe I may state without immodesty that I am too good a player to have stayed otherwise . . ."

"And I assure you, Markham," interrupted Vance, "that Mr. Spotswoode is too good a player to have stayed unless he had actually had a four-straight-flush. That is the only hand he would have been justified in backing at the betting odds of two to one.—You see, I had opened for the amount in the pot, and Mr. Spotswoode had to put up half the amount of the money on the table in order to stay—making it a two-to-one bet.—Now, these odds are not high, and any non-opening hand smaller than a four-straight-flush would not have warranted the risk. As it was, he had, with a one-card draw, two chances in forty-seven of making a straight-flush, nine chances in forty-seven of making a flush, and eight chances in forty-seven of making a straight; so that he had nineteen chances in forty-seven—or more than one chance in three—of strengthening his hand into either a straight-flush, a flush, or a straight."

"Exactly," assented Spotswoode. "However, after I had drawn my one card, the only possible question in Mr. Vance's mind was whether or not I had made my straight-flush. If I had not made it—or had merely drawn a straight or a flush—Mr. Vance figured, and figured rightly, that I would not have seen his large bet and also

have raised it the limit. To have done so, in those circumstances, would have been irrational poker. Not one player in a thousand would have taken such a risk on a mere bluff. Therefore, had Mr. Vance not laid down his four aces when I raised him, he would have been foolhardy in the extreme. It turned out, of course, that I was actually bluffing; but that does not alter the fact that the correct and logical thing was for Mr. Vance to quit."

"Quite true," Vance agreed. "As Mr Spotswoode says, not one player in a thousand would have wagered the limit without having filled his straight-flush, knowing I had a pat hand. Indeed, one might almost say that Mr. Spotswoode, by doing so, has added another decimal point to the psychological subtleties of the game; for, as you see, he analysed my reasoning, and carried his own reasoning a step farther."

Spotswoode acknowledged the compliment with a slight bow; and Cleaver reached for the cards and began to shuffle them. But the tension had been broken, and the game was not resumed.

Something, however, seemed to have gone wrong with Vance. For a long while he sat frowning at his cigarette and sipping his high-ball in troubled distraction. At last he rose and walked to the mantel, where he stood studying a Cézanne water-colour he had given Markham years before. His action was a typical indication of his inner puzzlement.

Presently, when there came a lull in the conversation, he turned sharply and looked at Mannix.

"I say, Mr. Mannix,"—he spoke with only casual curiosity—"how does it happen you've never acquired a taste for poker? All good business men are gamblers at heart."

"Sure they are," Mannix replied, with pensive deliberation. "But poker, now, isn't my idea of gambling—positively not. It's got too much science. And it ain't quick enough for me—it hasn't got the kick in it, if you know what I mean. Roulette's my speed. When I was in Monte

Carlo last summer I dropped more money in ten minutes than you gentlemen lost here this whole evening. But I got action for my money."

"I take it, then, you don't care for cards at all."

"Not to play games with." Mannix had become expansive. "I don't mind betting money on the draw of a card, for instance. But no two out of three, y' understand. I want my pleasures to come rapid." And he snapped his thick fingers several times in quick succession to demonstrate the rapidity with which he desired to have his pleasures come.

Vance sauntered to the table and carelessly picked up a deck of cards.

"What do you say to cutting once for a thousand dollars?"

Mannix rose instantly.

"You're on!"

Vance handed the cards over, and Mannix shuffled them. Then he put them down and cut. He turned up a ten. Vance cut, and showed a king.

"A thousand I owe you," said Mannix, with no more concern than if it had been ten cents.

Vance waited without speaking, and Mannix eyed him craftily.

"I'll cut with you again—two thousand this time. Yes?"

Vance raised his eyebrows. "Double? . . . By all means." He shuffled the cards, and cut a seven.

Mannix's hand swooped down and turned a five.

"Well, that's three thousand I owe you," he said. His little eyes had now narrowed into slits, and he held his cigar clamped tightly between his teeth.

"Like to double it again—eh, what?" Vance asked. "Four thousand this time?"

Markham looked at Vance in amazement, and over Allen's face there came an expression of almost ludicrous consternation. Everyone present, I believe, was astonished

at the offer, for obviously Vance knew that he was giving Mannix tremendous odds by permitting successive doubling. In the end he was sure to lose. I believe Markham would have protested if at that moment Mannix had not snatched the cards from the table and begun to shuffle them.

"Four thousand it is!" he announced, putting down the deck and cutting. He turned up the queen of diamonds "You can't beat that lady—positively not!" He was suddenly jovial.

"I fancy you're right," murmured Vance, and he cut a trev.

"Want some more?" asked Mannix, with good-natured aggressiveness

"That's enough." Vance seemed bored. "Far too excitin'. I haven't your rugged constitution, don't y' know."

He went to the desk and made out a cheque to Mannix for a thousand dollars. Then he turned to Markham and held out his hand.

"Had a jolly evening and all that sort of thing . . . And, don't forget. we lunch together to-morrow. One o'clock at the club, what?"

Markham hesitated. "If nothing interferes"

"But reilly, y' know, it mustn't," insisted Vance. "You've no idea how eager you are to see me"

He was unusually silent and thoughtful during the ride home. Not one explanatory word could I get out of him. But when he bade me good-night he said: "There's a vital part of the puzzle still missing, and until it's found none of it has any meaning."

Chapter XXVIII

THE GUILTY MAN

(Tuesday, September 18th; 1 p.m.)

VANCE slept late the following morning, and spent the hour or so before lunch checking a catalogue of ceramics which were to be auctioned next day at the Anderson Galleries. At one o'clock we entered the Stuyvesant Club and joined Markham in the grill.

"The lunch is on you, old thing," said Vance. "But I'll make it easy. All I want is a rasher of English bacon, a cup of coffee, and a *croissant*."

Markham gave him a mocking smile.

"I don't wonder your economising after your bad luck of last night."

Vance's eyebrows went up.

"I rather fancied my luck was most extr'ordin'ry."

"You held four of a kind twice, and lost both hands."

"But, y' see," blandly confessed Vance, "I happened to know both times exactly what cards my opponents held."

Markham stared at him in amazement.

"Quite so," Vance assured him. "I had arranged before the game, d' y' see, to have those particular hands dealt." He smiled benignly. "I can't tell you, old chap, how I admire your delicacy in not referring to my rather unique guest, Mr. Allen, whom I had the bad taste to introduce so unceremoniously into your party. I owe you an explanation and an apology. Mr. Allen is not what one would call a charming companion. He is deficient in the patrician elegancies, and his display of jewellery was a bit vulgar—though I infinitely preferred his diamond studs to his piebald tie. But Mr. Allen has his points—decidedly he has his points. He ranks with Andy Blakely, Canfield, and

Honest John Kelly as an indoor soldier of fortune. In fact, our Mr. Allen is none other than Doc Wiley Allen, of fragrant memory."

"Doc Allen! Not the notorious old crook who ran the Eldorado Club?"

"The same. And, incidentally, one of the cleverest card manipulators in a once lucrative but shady profession."

"You mean this fellow Allen stacked the cards last night?" Markham was indignant.

"Only for the two hands you mentioned. Allen, if you happen to remember, was the dealer both times. I, who purposely sat on his right, was careful to cut the cards in accordance with his instructions. And you really must admit that no stigma can possibly attach to my deception, inasmuch as the only beneficiaries of Allen's manipulations were Cleaver and Spotswoode. Although Allen did deal me out of a kind on each occasion, I lost heavily both times."

Markham regarded Vance for a moment in puzzled silence, and then laughed good naturedly.

"You appear to have been in a philanthropic mood last night. You practically gave Mannix a thousand dollars by permitting him to double the stakes on each draw. A rather quixotic procedure, I should say."

"It all depends on one's point of view, don't y' know. Despite my financial losses—which, by the bye, I have every intention of charging up to your office budget—the game was most successful. . . . Y' see, I attained the main object of my evening's entertainment."

"Oh, I remember!" said Markham vaguely, as if the matter, being of slight importance, had for the moment eluded his memory. "I believe you were going to ascertain who murdered the Odell girl."

"Amazin' memory! . . . Yes, I let fall the hint that I might be able to clarify the situation to-day."

"And whom am I to arrest?"

Vance took a drink of coffee and slowly lit a cigarette.

"I'm quite convinced, y' know, that you won't believe

me," he returned, in an even, matter-of-fact voice. "But it was Spotswoode who killed the girl."

"You don't tell me!" Markham spoke with undisguised irony. "So it was Spotswoode! My dear Vance, you positively bowl me over. I would telephone Heath at once to polish up his handcuffs, but, unfortunately, miracles--such as strangling persons from across town--are not recognised possibilities in this day and age. . . . Do let me order you another *croissant*."

Vance extended his hands in a theatrical gesture of exasperated despair.

"For an educated, civilized man, Markham, there's something downright primitive about the way you cling to optical illusions. I say, y' know, you're exactly like an infant who really believes that the magician generates a rabbit in a silk hat, simply because he sees it done."

"Now you're becoming insulting."

"Rather!" Vance pleasantly agreed. "But something drastic must be done to disentangle you from the Lorelei of legal facts. You're so deficient in imagination, old thing."

"I take it that you would have me close my eyes and picture Spotswoode sitting up stairs here in the Stayvesant Club and extending his arms to 71st Street. But I simply couldn't do it. I'm a commonplace chap. Such a vision would strike me as ludicrous; it would smack of a hashish dream. . . . You yourself don't use *Cannabis indica*, do you?"

"Put that way, the idea does sound a bit supernatural. And yet: *Certum est quia in possibile est*. I rather like that maxim, don't y' know; for, in the present case, the impossible is true. Oh, Spotswoode's guilty--no doubt about it. And I'm going to cling tenaciously to that apparent hallucination. Moreover, I'm going to try to lure you into its toils: for your own--as we at surdly say--good name is at stake. As it happens, Markham, you are at this moment shielding the real murderer from publicity."

Vance had spoken with the easy assurance that precludes argument; and from the altered expression on Markham's face I could see he was moved.

"Tell me," he said, "how you arrived at your fantastic belief in Spotswoode's guilt."

Vance crushed out his cigarette and folded his arms on the table

"We begin with my quartet of possibilities—Mannix, Cleaver, Lindquist, and Spotswoode. Realising, as I did, that the crime was carefully planned with the sole object of murder, I knew that only some one hopelessly ensnared in the lady's net could have done it. And no suitor outside of my quartet could have been thus enmeshed, or we would have learned of him. Therefore, one of the four was guilty. Now, Lindquist was eliminated when we found out that he was bed-ridden in a hospital at the time of Skeel's murder; for obviously the same person committed both crimes——"

"But," interrupted Markham, "Spotswoode had an equally good alibi for the night of the Canary's murder. Why eliminate one and not the other?"

"Sorry, but I can't agree with you. Being prostrated at a known place surrounded by incorruptible and disinterested witnesses, both preceding and during an event, is one thing; but being actually on the ground, as Spotswoode was that fatal evening, within a few minutes of the time the lady was murdered, and then being alone in a taxicab for fifteen minutes or so following the event—that is another thing. No one, as far as we know, actually saw the lady alive after Spotswoode took his departure."

"But the proof of her having been alive and spoken to him is incontestable"

"Granted. I admit that a dead woman doesn't scream and call for help, and then converse with her murderer."

"I see." Markham spoke with sarcasm. "You think it was Skeel, disguising his voice."

"Lord, no! What a priceless notion! Skeel didn't want anyone to know he was there. Why should he have staged such a masterpiece of idiocy? That certainly isn't the explanation. When we find the answer it will be reasonable and simple."

"That's encouraging," smiled Markham. "But proceed with your reasons for Spotswoode's guilt."

"Three of my quartet, then, were potential murderers," Vance resumed. "Accordingly, I requested an evening of social relaxation, that I might put them under the psychological microscope, as it were. Although Spotswoode's ancestry was wholly consistent with his having been the guilty one, nevertheless I confess I thought that Cleaver or Mannix had committed the crime; for, by their own statements, either of them could have done it without contradicting any of the known circumstances of the situation. Therefore, when Mannix declined your invitation to play poker last night, I put Cleaver to the first test. I waggled to Mr. Allen, and he straightway proceeded to perform his first feat of prestidigitation."

Vance paused and looked up.

"You perhaps recall the circumstances? It was a jackpot. Allen dealt Cleaver a four straight-flush and gave me three kings. The other hands were so poor that everyone else was compelled to drop out. I opened; and Cleaver stayed. On the draw, Allen gave me another king, and gave Cleaver the card he needed to complete his straight flush. Twice I bet a small amount, and each time Cleaver raised me. Finally, I called him and of course, he won. He couldn't help but win, if you see. He was betting on a sure thing. Since I opened the pot and drew two cards, the highest hand I could possibly have held would have been four of a kind. Cleaver knew this, and having a straight-flush, he also knew before he raised my bet, that he had me beaten. At once I realised that he was not the man I was after."

"By what reasoning?"

"A poker-player, Markham, who would bet on a sure-thing is one who lacks the egotistical self-confidence of the highly subtle and supremely capable gambler. He is not a man who will take hazardous chances and tremendous risks, for he possesses, to some degree, what the psychoanalysts call an inferiority complex, and instinctively he grasps at

every possible opportunity of protecting and bettering himself. In short, he is not the ultimate, unadulterated gambler. And the man who killed the Odell girl was a supreme gambler who would stake everything on a single turn of the wheel, for, in killing her, that is exactly what he did. And only a gambler whose paramount self-confidence would make him scorn, through sheer egotism, to bet on a sure thing, could have committed such a crime.—Therefore Cleaver was eliminated as a suspect."

Markham was now listening intently.

"The test to which I put Spotswoode a little later," Vance went on, "had originally been intended for Mannix, but he was out of the game. That didn't matter, however, for, had I been able to eliminate both Cleaver and Spotswoode, then Mannix would undoubtedly have been the guilty man. Of course I would have planned something else to substantiate the fact; but, as it was, that wasn't necessary. . . . The test I applied to Spotswoode was pretty well explained by the gentlemen himself. As he said, not one player in a thousand would have wagered the limit against a pat hand, when he himself held nothing. It was tremendous—superb! It was probably the most remarkable bluff ever made in a game of poker. I couldn't help admiring him when he calmly shoved forward all his chips, knowing, as I did, that he held nothing. He staked everything, I see, wholly on his conviction that he could follow my reasoning step by step and, in the last analysis, outwit me. It took courage and daring to do that. And it also took a degree of self confidence which would never have permitted him to bet on a sure thing. The psychological principles involved in that hand were identical with those of the Odell crime. I threatened Spotswoode with a powerful hand—a pat hand—just as the girl, no doubt, threatened him; and instead of compromising—instead of calling me or laying down—he outreached me; he resorted to one supreme *coup*, though it meant risking everything. . . . My word, Markham! Can't you see how the man's charac-

ter, as revealed in that amazing gesture, dovetails with the psychology of the crime?"

Markham was silent for a while; he appeared to be pondering the matter.

"But you yourself, Vance, were not satisfied at the time," he submitted at length. "In fact, you looked doubtful and worried."

"True, old dear. I was no end worried. The psychological proof of Spotswoode's guilt came so dashed unexpectedly—I wasn't looking for it, don't y' know. After eliminating Cleaver I had a *parti pris*, so to speak, in regard to Mannix; for all the material evidence in favour of Spotswoode's innocence—that is, the seeming physical impossibility of his having strangled the lady—had, I admit, impressed me. I'm not perfect, don't y' know. Being unfortunately human, I'm still susceptible to the malicious animal magnetism about facts and appearances, which you lawyer chaps are continuously exuding over the earth like some vast asphyxiating effluvium. And even when I found that Spotswoode's psychological nature fitted perfectly with all the factors of the crime, I still harboured a doubt in regard to Mannix. It was barely possible that he would have played the hand just as Spotswoode played it. That is why, after the game was over, I tackled him on the subject of gambling. I wanted to check his psychological reactions."

"Still, he staked everything on one turn of the wheel, as you put it."

"Ah! But not in the same sense that Spotswoode did. Mannix is a cautious and timid gambler as compared with Spotswoode. To begin with, he had an equal chance and an even bet, whereas Spotswoode had no chance at all—his hand was worthless. And yet Spotswoode wagered the limit on a pure bit of mental calculation. That was gambling in the higher ether. On the other hand, Mannix was merely tossing a coin, with an even chance of winning. Furthermore, no calculation of any kind entered into it; there was no planning, no figuring, no daring. And, as I have told you

from the start, the Odell murder was premeditated and carefully worked out with shrewd calculation and supreme daring. . . . And what true gambler would ask an adversary to double a bet on the second flip of the coin, and then accept an offer to redouble on the third flip? I purposely tested Mannix in that way, so as to preclude any possibility of error. Thus I not only eliminated him—I expunged him, eradicated him, wiped him out utterly. It cost me a thousand dollars, but it purged my mind of any lingering doubt. I then knew, despite all the contr'ry material indications, that Spotswoode had done away with the lady."

"You make your case theoretically plausible. But, practically, I'm afraid I can't accept it." Markham was more impressed, I felt, than he cared to admit. "Damn it, man!" he exploded after a moment. "Your conclusion demolishes all the established landmarks of rationality and sane credibility.—Just consider the facts." He had now reached the argumentative stage of his doubt. "You say Spotswoode is guilty. Yet we know, on irrefutable evidence, that five minutes after he came out of the apartment the girl screamed and called for help. He was standing by the switchboard, and, accompanied by Jessup, he went to the door and carried on a brief conversation with her. She was certainly alive then. Then he went out the front door, entered a taxicab, and drove away. Fifteen minutes later he was joined by Judge Redfern as he alighted from the taxicab in front of the club here—nearly forty blocks away from the apartment-house! It would have been impossible for him to have made the trip in less time; and, moreover, we have the chauffeur's record. Spotswoode simply did not have either the opportunity or the time to commit the murder between half-past eleven and ten minutes to twelve when Judge Redfern met him. And, remember, he played poker in the club here until three in the morning—hours after the murder took place."

Markham shook his head with emphasis.

"Vance, there's no human way to get round those facts.

They're firmly established ; and they preclude Spotswoode's guilt as effectively and finally as though he had been at the North Pole that night."

Vance was unmoved.

"I admit everything you say," he rejoined. "But as I have stated before, when material facts and psychological facts conflict, the material facts are wrong. In this case, they may not actually be wrong, but they're deceptive."

"Very well, *magnus Apollo!*" The situation was too much for Markham's exacerbated nerves. "Show me how Spotswoode could have strangled the girl and ransacked the apartment, and I'll order Heath to arrest him."

"'Pon my word, I can't do it," expostulated Vance. "Omniscience was denied me. But—deuce take it!—I think I've done rather well in pointing out the culprit. I never agreed to expound his technic, don't y' know."

"So! Your vaunted penetration amounts only to that, does it? Well, well! Here and now I become a professor of the higher mental sciences, and I pronounce solemnly that Doctor Crippen murdered the Odell girl. To be sure, Crippen's dead; but that fact doesn't interfere with my newly adopted psychological means of deduction. Crippen's nature, you see, fits perfectly with all the esoteric and recondite indications of the crime. To-morrow I'll apply for an order of exhumation."

Vance looked at him with waggish reproachfulness, and sighed.

"Recognition of my transcendent genius, I see, is destined to be posthumous. *Omnia post obitum fingit majora vetustas.* In the meantime I bear the taunts and jeers of the multitude with a stout heart. My head is bloody, but unbowed."

He looked at his watch, and then seemed to become absorbed with some line of thought.

"Markham," he said, after several minutes, "I've a concert at three o'clock, but there's an hour to spare. I want to take another look at that apartment and its various approaches. Spotswoode's trick—and I'm convinced it was

nothing more than a trick—was enacted there ; and if we are ever to find the explanation, we shall have to look for it on the scene."

I had got the impression that Markham, despite his emphatic denial of the possibility of Spotwoode's guilt was not entirely unconvinced. Therefore, I was not surprised when, with only a half hearted protest, he assented to Vance's proposal to revisit the Odell apartment.

Chapter XXIX

BEETHOVEN'S "ANDANTE"

(Tuesday, September 16th ; 2 p m)

LESS than half an hour later we again entered the main hall of the little apartment building in 71st Street. Spively, as usual, was on duty at the switchboard. Just inside the public reception room the officer on guard reclined in an easy chair, a cigar in his mouth. On seeing the District Attorney, he rose with forced alacrity.

"When are you going to open things up, Mr. Markham?" he asked. "This rest-cure is ruin' my health."

"Very soon I hope, officer," Markham told him. "Any more visitors?"

"Nobody, sir." The man stifled a yawn.

"Let's have your key to the apartment.—Have you been inside?"

"No, sir. Orders were to stay out here."

We passed into the dead girl's living room. The shades were still up, and the sunlight of midday was pouring in. Nothing apparently had been touched: not even the overturned chairs had been righted. Markham went to the window and stood, his hands behind him, surveying the scene despondently. He was labouring under a growing uncertainty, and he watched Vance with a cynical amusement which was far from spontaneous.

Vance, after lighting a cigarette, proceeded to inspect the two rooms, letting his eyes rest searchingly on the various disordered objects. Presently he went into the bathroom and remained several minutes. When he came out he carried a towel with several dark smudges on it.

"This is what Skeel used to erase his finger-prints," he said, tossing the towel on the bed.

"Marvellous!" Markham rallied him. "That, of course, convicts Spotswoode."

"Tut, tut! But it helps substantiate my theory of the crime." He walked to the dressing table and sniffed at a tiny silver atomiser. "The lady used Coty's *Chypre*," he murmured. "Why *will* they all do it?"

"And just what does that help substantiate?"

"Markham, dear, I'm absorbing atmosphere. I'm attuning my soul to the apartment's vibrations. Do let me attune in peace. I may have a visitation at any moment--a revelation from Sinai, as it were."

He continued his round of investigation, and at last passed out into the main hall, where he stood, one foot holding open the door, looking about him with curious intentness. When he returned to the living-room, he sat down on the edge of the rosewood table, and surrendered himself to gloomy contemplation. After several minutes he gave Markham a sardonic grin.

"I say! This *is* a problem. Dash it all, it's uncanny!"

"I had an idea," scoffed Markham, "that sooner or later you'd revise your deductions in regard to Spotswoode."

Vance stared idly at the ceiling.

"You're devilish stubborn, don't y' know. Here I am trying to extricate you from a deuced unpleasant predicament, and all you do is to indulge in caustic observations calculated to damp my youthful ardour."

Markham left the window and seated himself on the arm of the davenport facing Vance. His eyes held a worried look.

"Vance, don't get me wrong. Spotswoode means nothing in my life. If he did this thing, I'd like to know it. Unless this case is cleared up, I'm in for an ungodly wallop by the newspapers. It's not to my interests to discourage any possibility of a solution. But your conclusion about Spotswoode is impossible. There are too many contradictory facts."

"That's just it, don't y' know. The contradict'ry indications are far too perfect. They fit together too beautifully; They're almost as fine as the forms in a Michelangelo statue. They're too carefully co-ordinated, d' ye see, to have been merely a haphazard concatenation of circumstances. They signify conscious design."

Markham rose and, slowly returning to the window, stood looking out into the little rear yard.

"If I could grant your premise that Spotswoode killed the girl," he said, "I could follow your syllogism. But I can't very well convict a man on the grounds that his defence is too perfect."

"What we need, Markham, is inspiration. The mere contortions of the sibyl are not enough," Vance took a turn up and down the room. "What really infuriates me is that I've been outwitted. And by a manufacturer of automobile accessories! . . . It's most humiliatin'."

He sat down at the piano and played the opening bars of Brahms's *Capriccio* No. 1.

"Needs tuning," he muttered; and, sauntering to the Boule cabinet, he ran his finger over the marquetry. "Pretty and all that," he said, "but a bit fussy. Good example, though. The dealer's aunt from Seattle should get a very fair price for it." He regarded a pendant girandole at the side of the cabinet. "Rather nice, that, if the original candles hadn't been supplanted with modern frosted bulbs." He paused before the little china clock on the mantel. "Gingerbread. I'm sure it kept atrocious time." Passing on to the *escritoire*, he examined it critically. "Imitation French Renaissance. But rather dainty, what?" Then his eye fell on the waste-piper basket, and he picked it up. "Silly idea," he commented, "—making a basket out of vellum. The artistic triumph of some lady interior decorator, I'll wager. Enough vellum here to bind a set of Epictetus. But why ruin the effect with hand-painted garlands? The æsthetic instinct has not as yet invaded these fair States—decidedly not."

Setting the basket down, he studied it meditatively for a moment. Then he leaned over and took from it the piece of crumpled wrapping-paper to which he had referred the previous day.

"This doubtless contained the lady's last purchase on earth," he mused. "Very touchin'. Are you sentimental about such trifles, Markham? Anyway, the purple string round it was a godsend to Skeel. . . . What knickknack, do you suppose, paved the way for the frantic Tony's escape?"

He opened the paper, revealing a broken piece of corrugated cardboard and a large square dark-brown envelope.

"Ah, to be sure! Phonograph records." He glanced about the apartment. "But, I say, where did the lady keep the billy machine?"

"You'll find it in the toyer," said Markham wearily, without turning. He knew that Vance's chatter was only the outward manifestation of serious and perplexed thinking; and he was waiting with what patience he could muster.

Vance sauntered idly through the glass doors into the little reception-hall, and stood gazing abstractedly at a console phonograph of Chinese Chippendale design which stood against the wall at one end. The squat cabinet was partly covered with a prayer-rug, and upon it sat a polished bronze flower-bowl.

"At any rate, it doesn't look phonographic," he remarked. "But why the prayer-rug?" He examined it casually. "An Italian—probably called a Casarian for sale purpose. Not very valuable—too much on the Oushak type. . . . wonder what the lady's taste in music was. Victor Herbert, doubtless." He turned back the rug and lifted the lid of the cabinet. There was a record already on the machine, and he leaned over and looked at it.

"My word! The *Andante* from Beethoven's C Minor Symphony!" he exclaimed cheerfully. "You know the movement, of course, Markham. The most perfect *Andante*

ever written." He wound up the machine. "I think a little good music might clear the atmosphere and volatilise our perturbation, what?"

Markham paid no attention to his banter; he was still gazing dejectedly out of the window.

Vance started the motor, and placing the needle on the record, returned to the living-room. He stood staring at the davenport, concentrating on the problem in hand. I sat in the wicker chair by the door waiting for the music. The situation was getting on my nerves, and I began to feel fidgety. A minute or two passed, but the only sound which came from the phonograph was a faint scratching. Vance looked up with mild curiosity, and walked back to the machine. Inspecting it cursorily, he once more set it in operation. But though he waited several minutes, no music came forth.

"I say! That's deuced queer, y' know," he grumbled, as he changed the needle and rewound the motor.

Markham had now left the window, and stood watching him with good natured tolerance. The turn-table of the phonograph was spinning, and the needle was tracing its concentric revolutions; but still the instrument refused to play. Vance, with both hands on the cabinet, was leaning forward, his eyes fixed on the silently revolving record with an expression of amused bewilderment.

"The sound box is probably broken," he said. "Silly machines, any way."

"The difficulty is, I imagine," Markham chided him, "lies in your patrician ignorance of so vulgar and democratic a mechanism. Permit me to assist you."

He moved to Vance's side, and I looked curiously over his shoulder. Everything appeared to be in order, and the needle had now almost reached the end of the record. But only a faint scratching was audible.

Markham stretched forth his hand to lift the sound-box. But his movement was never completed.

At that moment the little apartment was filled with

several terrifying treble screams, followed by two shrill calls for help. A cold chill swept my body, and there was a tingling at the roots of my hair.

After a short silence, during which the three of us remained speechless, the same feminine voice said in a loud, distinct tone: "*No ; nothing is the matter. I'm sorry. . . . Everything is all right. . . . Please go home, and don't worry*"

The needle had come to the end of the record. There was a slight click, and the automatic device shut off the motor. The almost terrifying silence that followed was broken by a sardonic chuckle from Vance.

"Well, old dear," he remarked languidly, as he strolled back into the living-room, "so much for your infutable facts !"

There came a loud knocking on the door, and the officer on duty outside looked in with a startled face.

"It's all right," Markham informed him in a husky voice. "I'll call you when I want you."

Vance lay down on the davenport and took out another cigarette. Having lighted it, he stretched his arms far over his head and extended his legs, like a man in whom a powerful physical tension had suddenly relaxed.

"For my soul, Markham, we've all been babes in the woods," he drawled. "An incontrovertible alibi—my word! If the law supposes that, as Mr. Bumble said, the law is a ass, an idiot.—Oh, Sammy, Sammy, why worn't there a alleybi! . . . Markham, I blush to admit it, but it's you and I who've been the unutterable asses."

Markham had been standing by the instrument like a man dazed, his eyes riveted hypnotically on the telltale record. Slowly he came into the room and threw himself wearily into a chair.

"Those precious facts of yours!" continued Vance. "Stripped of their carefully disguised appearance, what are they?—Spotswoode prepared a phonograph record—a simple enough task. Everyone makes 'em nowadays——"

"Yes. He told me he had a workshop at his home on Long Island where he tinkered a bit."

"He really didn't need it, y' know. But it facilitated things, no doubt. The voice on the record is merely his own in falsetto—better for the purpose than a woman's, for it's stronger and more penetrating. As for the label, he simply soaked it off of an ordin'ry record, and pasted it on his own. He brought the lady several new records that night, and concealed this one among them. After the theatre he enacted his gruesome little drama and then carefully set the stage so that the police would think it was a typical burglar's performance. When this had been done, he placed the record on the machine, set it going, and calmly walked out. He had placed the prayer-rug and bronze bowl on the cabinet of the machine to give the impression that the phonograph was rarely used. And the precaution worked, for no one thought of looking into it. Why should they? . . . Then he asked Jessup to call a taxicab—everything quite natural, y' see. While he was waiting for the car the needle reached the recorded screams. They were heard plainly—it was night, and the sounds carried distinctly. Moreover, being filtered through a wooden door, their phonographic timbre was well disguised. And, if you'll note, the enclosed horn is directed toward the door, not three feet away."

"But the synchronisation of his questions and the answers on the record . . . ?"

"The simplest part of it. You remember Jessup told us that Spotswoode was standing with one arm on the switch board when the screams were heard. He merely had his eye on his wrist watch. The moment he heard the cry, he calculated the intermission on the record, and put his question to the imagin'ry lady at just the right moment to receive the record's response. It was all carefully figured out beforehand; he no doubt rehearsed it in his laboratory. It was deuced simple, and practically proof against failure. The record is a large one—twelve-inch diameter, I should

say—and it requires above five minutes for the needle to traverse it. By putting the screams at the end, he allowed himself ample time to get out and order a taxicab. When the car at last came, he rode direct to the Stuyvesant Club, where he met Judge Redfern and played poker till three. If he hadn't met the Judge, rest assured he would have impressed his presence on someone else so as to have established an alibi."

Markham shook his head gravely.

"Good God! No wonder he importuned me on every possible occasion to let him visit this apartment again. Such a damning piece of evidence as that record must have kept him awake at night."

"Still, I rather fancy that if I hadn't discovered it, he would have succeeded in getting possession of it as soon as your *sergent-de-ville* was removed. It was annoyin' to be unexpectedly barred from the apartment, but I doubt if it worried him much. He would have been on hand when the Canary's aunt took possession, and the retrieving of the record would have been comparatively easy. Of course the record constituted a hazard, but Spotswoode isn't the type who'd shy at a low bunker of that kind. No; the thing was planned scientifically enough. He was defeated by sheer accident."

"And Skeel?"

"He was another unfortunate circumstance. He was hiding in the closet there when Spotswoode and the lady came in at eleven. It was Spotswoode whom he saw strangle his erstwhile *amoureuse* and rifle the apartment. Then, when Spotswoode went out, he came forth from hiding. He was probably looking down at the girl when the phonograph emitted its blood-chilling wails. . . . My word! Fancy being in a cold funk, gazing at a murdered woman, and then hearing piercing screams behind you! It was a bit too much even for the hardened Tony. I don't wonder he forgot all caution and put his hand on the table to steady himself. . . . And then came Spotswoode's voice through the door, and

the record's answer. This must have puzzled Skeel. I imagine he thought for a moment he'd lost his reason. But pretty soon the significance of it dawned on him; and I can see him grinning to himself. Obviously he knew who the murderer was—it would not have been in keeping with his character had he failed to learn the identities of the Canary's admirers. And now there had fallen into his lap, like manna from heaven, the most perfect opportunity for blackmail that any such charmin' young gentleman could desire. He doubtless indulged himself with roseate visions of a life of opulence and ease at Spotswoode's expense. When Cleaver phoned a few minutes later, he merely said the lady was out, and then set to work planning his own departure."

"But I don't see why he didn't take the record with him."

"And remove from the scene of the crime the one piece of unanswerable evidence? . . . Bad strategy, Markham. If he himself had produced the record later, Spotswoode would simply have denied all knowledge of it, and accused the blackmailer of a plot. Oh, no; Skeel's only course was to leave it, and apply for an enormous settlement from Spotswoode at once. And I imagine that's what he did. Spotswoode no doubt gave him something on account and promised him the rest anon, hoping in the meantime to retrieve the record. When he failed to pay, Skeel phoned you and threatened to tell everything, thinking to spur Spotswoode to action. . . . Well, he spurred him—but not to the action desired. Spotswoode probably met him by appointment last Saturday night, ostensibly to hand over the money, but, instead, throttled the chap. Quite in keeping with his nature, don't y' know . . . Stout tella, Spotswoode."

"The whole thing . . . it's amazing."

"I shouldn't say that, now. Spotswoode had an unpleasant task to perform, and he set about it in a cool, logical, forthright, business-like manner. He had decided that his little Canary must die for his peace of mind: she'd probably made herself most annoyin'. So he arranged the

date—like any judge passing sentence on a prisoner at the bar—and then proceeded to fabricate an alibi. Being something of a mechanic, he arranged a mechanical alibi. The device he chose was simple and obvious enough—no tortuosities or complications. And it would have succeeded but for what the insurance companies piously call an act of God. No one can foresee accidents, Markham: they wouldn't be accidental if one could. But Spotswoode certainly took every precaution that was humanly possible. It never occurred to him that you would thwart his every effort to return here and confiscate the record; and he couldn't anticipate my taste in music, nor know that I would seek solace in the tonal art. Furthermore, when one calls on a lady, one doesn't expect that another suitor is going to hide himself in the clothes-press. It isn't done, don't y' know. . . . All in all, the poor Johnny was beaten by a run of abominable luck."

"You overlook the fiendishness of the crime," Markham reproached him tartly

"Don't be so confoundedly moral, old thing. Everyone's a murderer at heart. The person who has never felt a passionate hankering to kill someone is without emotions. And do you think it's ethics or theology that stays the average person from homicide? Dear no! It's lack of courage—the fear of being found out, or haunted, or cursed with remorse. Observe with what delight the people *en masse*—to wit, the state—put men to death, and then gloat over it in the newspapers. Nations declare war against one another on the slightest provocation, so they can, with immunity, vent their lust for slaughter. Spotswoode, I'd say, is merely a rational animal with the courage of his convictions."

"Society unfortunately isn't ready for your nihilistic philosophy just yet," said Markham. "And during the intervening transition human life must be protected."

He rose resolutely, and going to the telephone, called up Heath.

"Sergeant," he ordered, "get a John-Doe warrant and

meet me immediately at the Stuyvesant Club. Bring a man with you—there's an arrest to be made."

"At last the law has evidence after its own heart," chirped Vance, as he lazily donned his top-coat and picked up his hat and stick. "What a grotesque affair your legal procedure is, Markham! Scientific knowledge—the facts of psychology—mean nothing to you learned Solons. But a phonograph record—ah! There, now, is something convincing, irrefragable, final, what?"

On our way out Markham beckoned to the officer on guard.

"Under no conditions," he said, "is anyone to enter this apartment until I return—not even with a signed permit."

When we had entered the taxicab, he directed the chauffeur to the club.

"So the newspapers want action, do they? Well, they're going to get it. . . . You've helped me out of a nasty hole, old man"

As he spoke, his eyes turned to Vance. And that look conveyed a profounder gratitude than any words could have expressed.

Chapter XXX

THE END

(Tuesday, September 18th; 3.30 p.m.)

It was exactly half-past three when we entered the rotunda of the Stuyvesant Club. Markham at once sent for the manager, and held a few words of private conversation with him. The manager then hastened away, and was gone about five minutes.

"Mr. Spotswoode is in his rooms," he informed Markham, on returning. "I sent the electrician up to test the light bulbs. He reports that the gentleman is alone, writing at his desk."

"And the room number?"

"Three forty-one." The manager appeared perturbed. "There won't be any fuss, will there, Mr. Markham?"

"I don't look for any." Markham's tone was chilly. "However, the present matter is considerably more important than your club."

"What an exaggerated point of view!" sighed Vance when the manager had left us. "The arrest of Spotswoode, I'd say, was the acme of futility. The man isn't a criminal, don't you know; he has nothing in common with Lombroso's *Uomo Delinquente*. He's what one might term a philosophic behaviourist."

Markham grunted but did not answer. He began pacing up and down agitatedly, keeping his eyes expectantly on the main entrance. Vance sought a comfortable chair, and settled himself in it with placid unconcern.

Ten minutes later Heath and Snitkin arrived. Markham

at once led them into an alcove and briefly explained his reason for summoning them.

"Spotswoode's upstairs now," he said. "I want the arrest made as quietly as possible."

"Spotswoode!" Heath repeated the name in astonishment. "I don't see——"

"You don't have to see—yet," Markham cut in sharply. "I'm taking all the responsibility for the arrest. And you're getting the credit—if you want it. That suit you?"

Heath shrugged his shoulders.

"It's all right with me . . . anything you say, sir." He shook his head uncomprehendingly. "But what about Jessup?"

"We'll keep him locked up. Material witness."

We ascended in the elevator and emerged at the third floor. Spotswoode's rooms were at the end of the hall, facing the Square. Markham, his face set grimly, led the way.

In answer to his knock Spotswoode opened the door and, greeting us pleasantly, stepped aside for us to enter.

"Any news yet?" he asked, moving a chair forward.

At this moment he got a clear view of Markham's face in the light, and at once he sensed the minatory nature of our visit. Though his expression did not alter, I saw his body suddenly go taut. His cold, indecipherable eyes moved slowly from Markham's face to Heath and Snitkin. Then his gaze fell on Vance and me, who were standing a little behind the others, and he nodded stiffly.

No one spoke; yet I felt that an entire tragedy was somehow being enacted, and that each actor heard and understood every word.

Markham remained standing, as if reluctant to proceed. Of all the duties of his office, I knew that the arrest of malefactors was the most distasteful to him. He was a worldly man, with the worldly man's tolerance for the misfortunes of evil. Heath and Snitkin had stepped forward and now waited with passive alertness for the District Attorney's order to serve the warrant.

Spotswoode's eyes were again on Markham.

"What can I do for you sir?" His voice was calm and without the faintest quaver.

"You can accompany these officers, Mr. Spotswoode," Markham told him quietly, with a slight inclination of his head toward the two imperturbable figures at his side.

"I arrest you for the murder of Margaret Odell."

"Ah!" Spotswoode's eyebrows lifted mildly. "Then you have—discovered something?"

"The Beethoven *Andante*."

Not a muscle of Spotswoode's face moved; but after a short pause he made a barely perceptible gesture of resignation.

"I can't say that it was wholly unexpected," he said evenly, with the tragic suggestion of a smile, "especially as you thwarted every effort of mine to secure the record. But then . . . the fortunes of the game are always uncertain." His smile faded, and his manner became grave. "You have acted generously toward me, Mr. Markham, in shielding me from the *caille*; and because I appreciate that courtesy, I should like you to know that the game I played was one in which I had no alternative."

"Your motive, however powerful," said Markham, "cannot extenuate your crime."

"Do you think I seek extenuation?" Spotswoode dismissed the imputation with a contemptuous gesture. "I'm not a schoolboy. I calculated the consequences of my course of action, and after weighing the various factors involved, decided to risk it. It was a gamble, to be sure; but it's not my habit to complain about the misfortunes of a deliberately planned risk. Furthermore, the choice was practically forced upon me. Had I not gambled in this instance, I stood to lose heavily nevertheless."

His face grew bitter.

"This woman, Mr. Markham, had demanded the impossible of me. Not content with bleeding me financially, she demanded legal protection, position, social prestige—such

things as only my name could give her. She informed me I must divorce my wife and marry her. I wonder if you apprehend the enormity of that demand? . . . You see, Mr. Markham, I love my wife, and I have children whom I love. I will not insult your intelligence by explaining how, despite my conduct, such a thing is entirely possible. . . . And yet, this woman commanded me to wreck my life and crush utterly those I held dear, solely to gratify her petty, ridiculous ambition! When I refused, she threatened to expose our relations to my wife, to send her copies of the letters I had written, to sue me publicly—in fine, to create such a scandal that, in any event, my life would be ruined, my family disgraced, my home destroyed.”

He paused and drew a deep inspiration.

“I have never been partial to half-way measures,” he continued impassively. “I have no talent for compromise. Perhaps I am a victim of my heritage. But my instinct is to play out a hand to the last chip—to force whatever danger threatens. And for just five minutes, a week ago, I understood how the fanatics of old could, with a calm mind and a sense of righteousness, torture their enemies who threatened them with spiritual destruction. . . . I chose the only course which might save those I love from disgrace and suffering. It meant taking a desperate risk. But the blood within me was such that I did not hesitate, and I was fired by the agony of a tremendous hate. I staked my life against a living death, on the remote chance of attaining peace. And I lost.”

Again he smiled faintly.

“Yes—the fortunes of the game. . . . But don’t think for a minute that I am complaining or seeking sympathy. I have lied to others perhaps, but not to myself. I detest a whiner—a self-excuser. I want you to understand that.”

He reached to the table at his side and took up a small limp-leather volume.

“Only last night I was reading Wilde’s ‘De Profundis.’ Had I been gifted with words, I might have made a similar

confession. Let me show you what I mean so that, at least, you won't attribute to me the final infamy of cravenness."

He opened the book, and began reading in a voice whose very fervour held us all silent:

"I brought about my own downfall. No one, be he high or low, need be ruined by any other hand than his own. Readily as I confess this, there are many who will, at this time at least, receive the confession sceptically. And although I thus mercilessly accuse myself, bear in mind that I do so without offering any excuse. Terrible as is the punishment inflicted upon me by the world, more terrible is the ruin I have brought upon myself. . . . In the dawn of manhood I recognised my position. . . . I enjoyed an honoured name, an eminent social position. . . . Then came the turning-point. I had become tired of dwelling on the heights--and descended by my own will into the depths. . . . I satisfied my desires wherever it suited me, and passed on. I forgot that every act, even the most insignificant act, of daily life, in some degree, makes or unmakes the character; and every occurrence which transpires in the seclusion of the chamber will some day be proclaimed from the housetops. I lost control of myself. I was no longer at the helm, and knew it not. I had become a slave to pleasure. . . . One thing only is left to me--complete humility."

He tossed the book aside.

"You understand now, Mr. Markham?"

Markham did not speak for several moments.

"Do you care to tell me about Skeel?" he at length asked.

"That swine!" Spotswoode sneered his disgust. "I could murder such creatures every day and regard myself as a benefactor of society. . . . Yes, I strangled him, and I would have done it before, only the opportunity did not offer. . . . It was Skeel who was hiding in the closet when I returned to the apartment after the theatre, and he must have seen me kill the woman. Had I known he was behind that locked closet door, I would have broken it down and

wiped him out then. But how was I to know? It seemed natural that the closet might have been kept locked—I didn't give it a second thought. . . . And the next night he telephoned me to the club here. He had first called my home on Long Island, and learned that I was staying here. I had never seen him before—didn't know of his existence. But, it seems, he had equipped himself with a knowledge of my identity—probably some of the money I gave to the woman went to him. What a muck-heap I had fallen into! . . . When he phoned, he mentioned the phonograph, and I knew he had found out something. I met him in the Waldorf lobby, and he told me the truth: there was no doubting his word. When he saw I was convinced, he demanded so enormous a sum that I was staggered."

Spotswoode lit a cigarette with steady fingers.

"Mr. Mucklen, I am no longer a rich man. The truth is, I am on the verge of bankruptcy. The business my father left me has been in a receiver's hands for nearly a year. The Long Island estate on which I live belongs to my wife. Few people know these things, but unfortunately they are true. It would have been utterly impossible for me to raise the amount Steel demanded, even had I been inclined to play the coward. I did, however, give him a small sum to keep him quiet for a few days, promising him all he asked as soon as I could convert some of my holdings. I hoped in the interim to get possession of the record and thus spike his guns. But in that I failed: and so, when he threatened to tell you everything, I agreed to bring the money to his home late last Saturday night. I kept the appointment, with the full intention of killing him. I was careful about entering, but he had helped me by explaining when and how I could get in without being seen. Once there, I wasted no time. The first moment he was off his guard I seized him—and gloried in the act. Then, locking the door and taking the key, I walked out of the house quite openly, and returned here to the club. —That's all, I think."

Vance was watching him musingly.

"So when you raised my bet last night," he said, "the amount represented a highly important item in your exchequer."

Spotswoode smiled faintly.

"It represented practically every cent I had in the world."

"Astonishin'! . . . And would you mind if I asked you why you selected the label of Beethoven's *Andante* for your record?"

"Another miscalculation," the man said wearily. "It occurred to me that if anyone should, by any chance, open the phonograph before I could return and destroy the record, he wouldn't be as likely to want to hear the classics as he would a more popular selection."

"And one who detests popular music had to find it! I fear, Mr. Spotswoode, that an unkind fate sat in at your game."

"Yes . . . If I were religiously inclined, I might talk poppycock about retribution and divine punishment."

"I'd like to ask you about the jewellery," said Markham. "It's not sportsmanlike to do it, and I wouldn't suggest it, except that you've already confessed voluntarily to the main points at issue."

"I shall take no offence at any question you desire to ask, sir," Spotswoode answered. "After I had recovered my letters from the document-box, I turned the rooms upside-down to give the impression of a burglary—being careful to use gloves, of course. And I took the woman's jewellery for the same reason. Parenthetically, I had paid for most of it. I offered it as a sop to Skeel, but he was afraid to accept it; and finally I decided to rid myself of it. I wrapped it in one of the club newspapers and threw it in a waste-bin near the Flatiron Building."

"You wrapped it in the morning *Herald*," put in Heath. "Did you know that Pop Cleaver reads nothing but the *Herald*?"

"Sergeant!" Vance's voice was a cutting reprimand.

"Certainly Mr. Spotswoode was not aware of that fact—else he would not have selected the *Herald*."

Spotswoode smiled at Heath with pitying contempt. Then, with an appreciative glance at Vance, he turned back to Markham.

"An hour or so after I had disposed of the jewels I was assailed by the fear that the package might be found and the paper traced. So I bought another *Herald* and put it on the rack." He paused. "Is that all?"

Markham nodded.

"Thank you—that's all; except that I must now ask you to go with these officers."

"In that case," said Spotswoode quietly, "there's a small favour I have to ask of you, Mr. Markham. Now that the blow has fallen, I wish to write a certain note—to my wife. But I want to be alone when I write it. Surely you understand that desire. It will take but a few moments. Your men may stand at the door—I can't very well escape. . . . The victor can afford to be generous to that extent."

Before Markham had time to reply, Vance stepped forward and touched his arm.

"I trust," he interposed, "that you won't deem it necessary to refuse Mr. Spotswoode's request."

Markham looked at him hesitatingly.

"I guess you've pretty well earned the right to dictate, Vance," he acquiesced.

Then he ordered Heath and Snitkin to wait outside in the hall, and he and Vance and I went into the adjoining room. Markham stood, as if on guard, near the door; but Vance, with an ironical smile, sauntered to the window and gazed out into Madison Square.

"My word, Markham!" he declared. "There's something rather colossal about that chap. Y' know, one can't help admiring him. He's so eminently sane and logical."

Markham made no response. The drone of the city's mid-afternoon noises, muffled by the closed windows,

seemed to intensify the ominous silence of the little bed-chamber where we waited.

Then came a sharp report from the other room.

Markham flung open the door. Heath and Snitkin were already rushing toward Spotswoode's prostrate body, and were bending over it when Markham entered. Immediately he wheeled about and glared at Vance, who now appeared in the doorway.

"He's shot himself!"

"Fancy that," said Vance

"You—you knew he was going to do that?" Markham spluttered.

"It was rather obvious, don't y' know"

Markham's eyes flashed angrily.

"And you deliberately interceded for him—to give him the opportunity?"

"Tut, tut, my dear fellow!" Vance reproached him.

"Pray don't give way to conventional moral indignation. However unethical - theoretically - it may be to take another's life, a man's own life is certainly his to do with as he chooses. Suicide is his inalienable right. And under the paternal tyranny of our modern democracy, I'm rather inclined to think it's about the only right he has left, what?"

He glanced at his watch and frowned.

"D' ye know, I've misse'd my concert, bothering with your beastly affairs," he complained amiably, giving Markham an engaging smile; "and now you're actually scolding me. 'Pon my word, old fellow, you're deuced ungrateful!"

THE DEATH OF
LAURENCE VINING

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ALAN THOMAS



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PART I

THE Judge finished his summing up.

“Members of the jury,” he said, “you may now retire if you wish to do so, to consider your verdict.”

The jurymen and the two lady jurors filed out of the court by a door near the judge's entrance. The expression on their faces, if they can be said to have had a common expression, was grave, and the prisoner's counsel was not hopeful. The Judge also retired, the whole Court rising as he got up from the bench. The prisoner—an elderly man who had commanded a certain sympathy owing to his extreme deafness—was led below by two warders. There was a buzz of excitement in the court and though the hour was early—it was barely twelve noon—some of the women who were occupying the public gallery, got out their luncheon sandwiches which they had brought in anticipation of an all day sitting. They had been determined to miss nothing.

This was a *cause célèbre* in the annals of murder trials. The proceedings had lasted five whole days and had filled the evening papers to the exclusion of all other news. The murder itself—or rather the alleged murder (for the jury had not yet given its verdict) had been

committed over a year before the trial. It had not appeared a difficult case at first, and the facts had been fairly plain. A man had been discovered lying under the counter of his small shop in the Chiswick High Road, badly wounded about the head by "a heavy blunt instrument." He had evidently just put up the shutters of his shop and had re-entered it perhaps to get his hat and coat before leaving. He had never emerged again. The discovery was made about two hours later by a policeman. The man, who was completely unconscious, was at once taken to a hospital where he was pronounced to be dead. For seven months Scotland Yard had laboured to trace the criminal; at first the papers had been full of the most hopeful notices; "Members of the flying squad to-day visited and searched certain premises, and came away with important clues"; "One of the big five left London to-day to pursue certain enquiries in the north of England." "An important new clue has just come to hand to-day" etc., etc. Gradually there had been less and less about the "Shop Murder" (as it was popularly christened) in the newspapers; and after seven months' fruitless search, the inspector in charge of the case closed his dossier, hoping against hope that some new fact might cause him to reopen it at an early date.

The new fact proved to be a person, well-known to Scotland Yard not as a criminal but as a friend. To describe Laurence Vining as an amateur detective would be crude to the point of untruth: he himself would have -- indeed on occasion had -- resented such a description

very deeply—"I am no detective" to use his own words, "still less am I an amateur—if that word is to denote an absence of scientific knowledge of any subject. But I am an amateur in the sense that I do not take money for my work. I am employed by no one and I am responsible to no one. If on occasions I have been of assistance to the Criminal Investigation Department, such service has been incidental to my interest. What is my interest? I will make no secret of it. If I were to ask you why man was created, what is his purpose here on earth?—Whence came he, and whither is he going?—What would you answer? You would probably tell me that those questions are beyond our human ken, and that it is but a vain pursuit for man to try to fathom the divine mysteries of the universe in fact, that we must take the world as we find it and ask no questions. And yet such questions as these have occupied the minds of the greatest thinkers and philosophers of all ages. Did not the Greeks tell us *Γνωθι σεαυτον*—"know thyself"? Is not this the proper study of man? Is it not the noblest path for him to follow—a path beset with perplexity, yet leading ever onwards and upwards to the lonely heights—of *what?* Of knowledge? Hardly that. Of spirituality perhaps, of self-realisation, of consciousness of life . . ."

Vining was a queer fish, but, to do him justice, he rarely talked of these things. Being a man of independent means, he could afford to devote his mind to the pursuit of knowledge: but whether his study of man made him any more of a human being, is open to grave doubt. In his earlier years, at Cambridge and just after, he had

been a brilliant, popular figure. But as time went on he developed a shyness and a reserve: "human warmth" became philosophised out of him; from a man, he had turned into a cold penetrating intelligence, retaining hardly any of those qualities which endear man to man or to woman. But he was not self-seeking and if it happened that in the course of his studies—which were of the most varied nature—he made a discovery which would be of use—or even of interest—to another person, he would communicate it to, or rather throw it at, that person with the air of one who should say: "Here is the knowledge you were seeking. I happened on it in the course of my work. My interest in it is in no way connected with yours, so please do not bother me by asking how I came by it . . ." Among the many subjects which he had made his peculiar study, crime was one, and on more than a few occasions he had been of real assistance to the authorities in unravelling the mysteries with which criminals sought to surround themselves. In the early days, his help had been regarded by the C.I.D. with a certain amount of suspicion. "An outsider trying to do our work," they had said. But it was not long before they had to admit his ability and above all his devilish ingenuity, in tracking down a wrong-doer: that ability, coupled with his obvious desire to avoid all publicity for himself and his complete indifference to any kind of kudos that might legitimately have come to him, soon removed the suspicion of the police authorities that he was trying to "butt in." And indeed it had been no uncommon thing of late for one of the chiefs of the

department, voluntarily to seek his advice and assistance in any case that presented peculiar difficulties. Though Vining's name had seldom if ever appeared in the newspapers in connection with any of his investigations, yet it was well-known in police circles and to some extent among journalists that he was often the "man behind the scenes"—the master mind . . . In this particular case of the "Shop Murder," he had laboured unceasingly long after the police had given up the search, and by dint of perseverance, coupled with ingenuity of an order truly diabolic, he had succeeded at length in drawing so fine meshed a net round one, John Plunket, that the wretched man, who had thought himself safe, and who had had less and less to fear as time went on, had all of a sudden been seized with alarm and had endeavoured to leave the country. But the arm of the law fell upon him at the last moment. He was arrested at the port of embarkation, was brought to London and was now standing his trial. To the whole of the proceedings, which had received a publicity almost unprecedented in the history of famous criminal trials, Laurence Vining, whose assiduity and amazing intuition had so largely contributed to the prisoner's arrest, showed the greatest indifference. So far from attending the court, he never read a single word of the accounts which filled the newspapers. While the whole of London, and a very great number of people throughout England (to say nothing of the interest the case had created in other lands) were waiting for the verdict, Vining would probably have been discovered—had anyone had the audacity to break into his presence

—sitting quietly at home reading the *Religio Medici*—or some other equally entrancing work.

Half an hour had gone by since the jury had retired, and still there was no sign of their reappearance. What if they could not agree, and the whole business had to be gone through again from start to finish ! The suspense was beginning to tell even on those people in the court who had not the slightest personal interest in the issue : while for those who were nearest and dearest to the prisoner himself, the lapse of time was well-nigh unendurable. Sitting near the front were Tom and Lil Plunket, the son and daughter of the man whose fate the jury were discussing. Tom was a small man, nearer forty than thirty, thin and rather delicate looking. But his constitution was good, and his agony of mind was well concealed behind his calm features. He sat for the most part quite still holding his sister's hand, and occasionally leaning his head close to hers and whispering some words of comfort and courage. He was going through hell, but his eyes were dry. His sister Lil was also delicate looking, and at any other time than the present would have been pronounced quite pretty. But now her face, like her soul, was in torment and it was only her extreme weariness and her hope—fostered to some extent by the prolonged absence of the jury (if there had not been some doubt they would not have been all this time, she thought) that kept her sitting in the court.

Three quarters of an hour, and still no sign. Sitting in the row behind Tom and Lil was another couple who were also awaiting the verdict in a state of tense excite-

ment. They were Jack Ransome, nephew of Laurence Vining, and Pamela Jackson, Vining's secretary and amanuensis. Jack was a handsome fellow of twenty-six years of age ; he had joined up in the army at the age of nineteen, in the middle of the war, and had finished up as a captain with D.S.O., and a Military Cross. He had then gone to Cambridge to start on a medical career and had found a student's life little to his liking. He had never known a mother or a father and had been brought up under the care of Laurence Vining. At first the two had got on quite well together ; but as Jack grew up, the difference of outlook between him and the elder man became more marked. His uncle's whole interest lay in the things of the mind ; that of the nephew was almost exclusively confined to the good things of this world - in sport, motoring and riding when he could get them, and generally in " having a good time." His work interested him but by no means absorbed him, and he was not particularly good at it. His uncle was keen that the young man should do well at his profession, and was at first disappointed and later on annoyed—seriously annoyed—that other and more frivolous occupations seemed to be leaving little or no time for serious study in the life of his nephew and heir. Laurence Vining was not a poor man, but he had no intention of leaving his money to be squandered away in useless living. Jack, alas, had taken very little notice of his uncle's oft repeated hints and warnings. Not that he was indifferent to the value of money, or that he had any intention of being " done out " of his inheritance. He had told his uncle often

enough that he would mend his ways, and though he looked upon the elder man as a "funny cove" whose ways were strange, yet the possibility of his being "cut off" never entered his head. Of late his general air of recklessness and devil-may-care—the sort of air that had justified people during the war in calling him a "dashing" young officer—coupled with a very recent failure on his part to pass one of his medical examinations (an exam. for the F.R.C.S., in which he had already been ploughed twice), all served to make the relations between him and his uncle severely strained. Their last interview—which had taken place before the result of his last exam. had been made known—had been anything but pleasant, and Jack had come away from it feeling himself "damn badly used."

"Does the man think I'm a child," he had asked—"just because I haven't got his confoundedly superior ways—thank God I haven't! For two pins, I'd chuck up all this damned medico business and go out East." But "going out East" was a vague phrase, with glamour but with very little reality for Jack. He soon calmed down enough to realise that he was penniless and had very few qualifications for earning his own living. Better to stick at the medico business and put up with his uncle. All the same it was galling—*damned* galling. And their next interview—in view of his recent failure, would not be pleasant.

In spite, however, of this unhappy relationship Jack, not being small-minded, had a very healthy respect for his uncle's work, especially when it was directed to such

practical issues as tracking down a criminal, and it was to see the outcome of his work—as well as perhaps to have the chance of sitting next to Pamela Jackson—that he was here in court this day.

Pamela had “fluffy hair” as Jack put it, and was distinctly attractive. A bit high-brow perhaps, he sometimes thought; but he’d soon cure her of that. Anyway, she danced damn well! One thing, however, disturbed him rather badly and that was the unbounded admiration she seemed to show for his uncle. Uncle Laurence was clever enough and all that, “but dash it, he’s nothing to rave over; besides, he must be fifty if he’s a day! I’ll talk to Pam about it, so I will!”

An hour since the jury had left the court! Jack leaned over to a rather large man who was sitting not far away and asked one of those questions which are the only sort that people like Jack— and for that matter a great number of other people as well—seem capable of asking in such circumstances.

“Well, Dr. Willing,” he said, “wonder what the delay’s about?”

The gentleman to whom the question was put smiled a rather wry smile and shrugged his shoulders. Dr. Benjamin Willing was one of Laurence Vining’s oldest friends, and was privileged to enjoy his confidence more than any other man. It is one of the most curious facts of human relationship that two persons whose characters and mentalities differ in nearly every respect, nevertheless, can contract the closest friendship between themselves. Two such persons were Laurence Vining and Benjamin

Willing. Vining had a powerful mind, capable of influencing others ; he was of the " leader " type. His outlook was hard, cynical and often bitter. Sarcasm for example, was his chief weapon of offence—and he could be very offensive. Willing was the exact opposite. He was a born follower, a natural lieutenant. He had an elastic and yielding mind—very impressionable. Anything like cynicism or bitterness was quite alien to him. He was never known to have been sarcastic in his life. Kindly, benevolent, tolerant, modest—these are the words that best described Ben Willing. His actions were simple and straightforward ; he had never been accused of having so complicated a thing as an *arrière pensée*. His friendship for Vining dated from the time when they were both at the 'Varsity together. From the very first the rôle which each was to play towards the other had been obvious. The convex of Vining's selfishness fitted in exactly with the concave of Ben's unselfishness. One man lead, the other followed. One was brilliant, the other basked in his friend's light. One was intolerant, the other suffered all things gladly. And yet Vining needed Willing just as much as Willing needed Vining. The two men were complementary to one another. There was soon laid the foundation of a life-long friendship. On going down from Cambridge, Vining had proceeded on a world tour, which separated him from his friend for two years. He had wanted Willing to go with him, but Willing had his career to think of, and could not possibly afford to interrupt his medical studies. But when Vining came back, their friendship was resumed, and in after life,

though the profession of the one and the occupation of the other led along different paths, yet they were almost as inseparable as they had been at College. Very few days would go by without a meeting between the two friends; though Ben's visits to Vining were far more frequent than Vining's visits to Ben, partly because it was in the nature of things that the lesser man should visit the greater man—at least Ben thought of it in this way; and partly because Ben lived with his sister who disliked Vining almost as much as Vining disliked her.

In all Vining's more practical investigations—and particularly those connected with crime—Ben had been his confidant; he had been permitted to see the great mind at work, and to follow its processes as best he could. But even Ben found it difficult at times to break through his friend's reserve, and had more than once been rebuked—and that in no uncertain terms—for his "failure to exhibit the first elements of an analytical mind." A prouder man than Ben would long since have ceased to put up with Vining's strictures. But Ben was meek and was all too conscious of the failings which Vining was never tired of attributing to him. In the "Shop Case" the two men had worked very closely together, and though once the solution had been found Vining showed no interest on the subsequent legal proceedings, Ben had followed them very keenly and had spent all the time that he was not compelled to give to his professional work, in court.

After an hour and a quarter's deliberation the jury returned. A hush fell over the court as they took their seats. A few seconds later the doors were locked. No one

was allowed to pass in or out. Then came three knocks. All eyes turned to the door whence the knocks sounded. The Judge entered and took his seat. Amid tense excitement the prisoner was brought up to the dock between two warders to hear the verdict. The man looked pale and tired, and the faint smile he gave his son and daughter who were sitting not three yards from where he was standing, soon flickered from his face.

All eyes were on the jury; their expressions were sombre enough, and hardly justified much expectation of a verdict favourable to the prisoner. The friends of the prisoner tried to convince themselves that the gloomy countenances of the jurors were but the natural result of an hour's discussion on a subject that, whatever the issue might be, could hardly conduce to cheerfulness. But they were not left in suspense for long.

There was perfect silence in the court when the Clerk of Arraignment put the fateful question :

"Members of the jury, have you agreed upon your verdict?"

The foreman stood up and with a firm voice replied :

"We have."

"Is it Guilty or Not Guilty?"

"Guilty."

There was some slight noise which came from the members of the public in court and which called forth a stern rebuke from the Judge. The prisoner did not move. He was staring blankly at the Judge. When complete silence had been restored, the Judge said in a clear voice :

"Prisoner at the bar, you stand convicted of wilful

murder. Have you anything to say for yourself why the Court should not pronounce judgment upon you according to the law ? ”

At first the prisoner gave no sign of having heard the question that was put to him. Then he slowly turned his head and looked at his son and then at his daughter. There was intense silence throughout the court, while the father gazed upon his children for the last time before sentence of death was to be passed upon him. Lil Plunket bent her head and wept bitterly. The prisoner once more turned towards the Judge and though he made a sound, no articulate words came forth.

The black cap was thereupon placed on the Judge's head, and in a low but clear voice he pronounced the awful sentence of death. When he reached the words “. . . and may the Lord have mercy on your soul,” there were but few whose eyes were not filled with tears.

§ II

The court quickly emptied. Most of the people slipped away pretty quietly wrapped in their own thoughts. Several of the women had collapsed and had to be supported out of the court. Jack Ransome caught Pamela by the arm and they hurried out together.

“ Makes one pretty sick, eh? ” said Jack quietly.

“ Oh it's horrible, horrible,” Pamela cried. “ It's all so cold-blooded. When will they do it, Jack ? ”

“ About three weeks' time, isn't it ? Unless there's an

appeal," answered Jack vaguely. "Where shall we lunch?"

"I don't think I want any lunch."

"Oh come," Jack rallied her. "Mustn't let this business bowl you over, you know. Let's forget about the damn' thing. Hi, taxi!"

Pamela caught his arm quickly. "Oh no, Jack," she exclaimed, "it's too extravagant!" But Jack hurried her into the cab and told the man to drive to a restaurant in Soho.

Neither of them spoke much on the journey.

When a quarter of an hour later, they entered the restaurant, the sight and smell of food seemed to cheer them both.

"Well, all I can say is," said Pamela, when they were seated at a small corner table, "your uncle must have made his name over this case. You know, Jack, I don't care *what* people say. He *is* a genius."

"Well, that's as it may be," replied Jack shortly. "Personally I don't give much truck for the sort of things he dabbles in. Olives?"

"That's because you don't understand them."

"Well, do you?"

Pamela did not answer for a while. When she did it was to say, "Jack, I think you're simply horrid."

But Jack was not to be put off. He felt strongly about the way his uncle had treated him, and was not averse from making Pamela his confidante. He wanted to have her on his side.

"Well, Pamela," he said, "you can say what you like

about Uncle Laurence. He may be a deucedly clever fellow and all that, but there are things about him which positively repel me. Look at his damned sarcastic manner to begin with. Is that a sign of cleverness? Is it clever to put on that superior manner of his and to patronise everybody he meets? And then look at the way he treats me!"

"You're prejudiced," objected Pamela shortly.

"Well, I may be," said Jack. "It certainly don't prejudice you in favour of a feller, if he's always lecturin' and criticisin'. . . . And there's another thing, Pamela."

"I don't think I want to hear any more, Jack," said the girl. "I think you're hopelessly prejudiced against your uncle, who is a very clever man—and who also happens to be my chief."

Jack Ransome laughed. In the circumstances it was not a wise thing for him to do.

"Oh come," he said. "I know there's loyalty and all that. . . ."

"It isn't just loyalty," cut in Pamela. "I'm not a particularly loyal person either —"

"Aren't you?" Jack smiled.

"Well, it isn't my loyalty for Mr. Vining that makes me think he's a great man."

"What is it then? Friendship for him?"

Pamela laughed a little bitterly. "You wouldn't say that if you knew a little more of our relationship."

"What do you mean?" Jack flared up. "What relationship?"

"Oh, it's all right," said Pamela. "It's not a case of intrigue or anything like that."

"Tell me," said Jack in a serious tone. "Is he fond of you?"

"Well, I'm very attractive, you know," said Pamela archly.

"For God's sake stop fooling, Pamela," cried Jack.

"Fooling! I was never more serious in my life. Do you dare to say I'm *not* attractive?"

"Look here," said Jack quietly, "this is damned serious for me. I . . . I mean . . . You matter to me most tremendously and for a damned outsider like Vining—yes, I don't care if he *is* my uncle—to come butting in— Well, I could kill him I wouldn't care who he was."

"I feel like killing Mr. Vining myself sometimes," answered Pamela in a tone that was not meant to be serious and yet struck Jack as being more than a chance remark. "He's the sort of man people *do* want to kill. They say it requires a tremendously strong motive to commit a murder. Mr. Vining himself would be sufficient motive for anybody. . . ."

Jack was surprised and somewhat alarmed at her strange words. He was a simple fellow and though he was accustomed enough to hearing people use such phrases as "I could kill that man," he never took the people or the phrases very seriously. Pamela seemed to be regarding the murder of his uncle as a practical proposition! She saw his discomfiture and added quickly, with a smile:

"Poor old Jack. It's not fair of me to tease you, is

it? Only you men are always saying things you don't mean. You know very well that you'd no more dream of killing your uncle or anybody else—in any circumstances whatever."

"I would," answered Jack stoutly. "If anybody interfered with your happiness I'd kill him—like a dog!"

"Well, that's very nice of you," said Pamela gently. "But as nobody is interfering with me, you can sheath the sword. Finish up my wine, there's a good thing."

"You are a funny creature, Pam," Jack continued. "First you stick up for Uncle Laurence and then you talk about killing him. What's behind it?"

"Nothing very much. But you're not very imaginative are you Jack? Can't you understand a person inspiring respect and hatred at the same time? I'm not speaking about my own feelings so much, because I'm not a particularly sensitive person. But anyone who was rather sensitive and who had to deal with your uncle, would know exactly what I mean. Your uncle is a man whose brains anyone would be bound to respect. He's clever—diabolically clever sometimes—perhaps in an intuitive rather than an intellectual way. But he's hard and cold and inhuman, and doesn't mind hurting. I should say that there's a good deal of the oriental about him. He must have made many enemies in his time. I have sometimes seen Suleiman look at him in a way that has frightened me, and Suleiman must have grown used by this time to being treated like a dog."

Suleiman was Vining's servant—a Malayan whom he had picked up during his travels in the East.

"Why do you work for him?" asked Jack.

"My dear," answered Pamela. "Beggars can't be choosers. He pays me well."

There was no one left in the small restaurant besides themselves.

Presently Jack put his hand gently on Pamela's. "I know I'm not much of a proposition, Pam," he began. But she quickly withdrew her hand.

"But, Pamela, I —"

"Don't, Jack. Don't, *please*." Her voice was not unkind.

"I suppose you mean I'm too poor. . . ."

"I don't mean anything. Ask for the bill, there's a good boy. I must be going."

Jack saw her into a bus in Shaftesbury Avenue, and then walked slowly along Piccadilly towards Hyde Park Corner. He cursed himself for a fool. But women were so funny. You never knew how they'd take anything. And here was Pamela working for a man she hated— at least that was what he had gathered. In the first place a girl like Pam shouldn't be working at all— anyway, she shouldn't be working for a man she hated. But she was too poor to chuck up the job. Damn money! Wasn't this his own case, too? If he didn't hate his job, at any rate he didn't seem to be much good at it: in the end it came to much the same thing. And he was too poor to chuck it up. Besides, chucking it up would mean that he'd have to go away—probably out East—and going away would mean that he'd never see Pamela any more. Then Jack suddenly began to realise how very much he needed Pamela— that he wanted her in fact, more than anything else in the world.

To marry Pamela this was what he wanted. To marry Pamela ! He *must* marry her. He—a penniless student,—she—as poor as he ! If *only* he had passed that last exam. That might have smoothed the path a bit with his uncle : as it was, Uncle Laurence was sure to be heavily sarcastic—and Jack couldn't stand sarcasm. He hated his dependence on his uncle, and he saw no end to it till he could make good . . . or till. . . .

He was entering St. George's Hospital almost mechanically, when his train of thought was interrupted by the porter who thrust a letter into his hand. It was in Uncle Laurence's handwriting. His first communication since he had learnt of Jack's recent failure.

On reaching his room he broke open the letter and read as follows :

“ DEAR JACK,

I am distressed to know the great efforts which you tell me you have made to master the science of medicine have not yet been justified before the world, and that your aptitude for the profession is still too modest to reveal itself. The groaning of the mountain has produced not even a mouse. But courage, Jack ! After all you have time, nay you have eternity before you—and is not anticipation sweet ?

Indeed that you may better appreciate your victory when it comes, and that you may be able to stand up and say “ Alone I did it,” I propose henceforward to leave you quite free, unembarrassed, unencumbered, and to remove from you the means of yielding to those

temptations which I know must be a source of constant disturbance to your work. For, after all, what is money but temptation ? You are, as the French say, *bien installé* at the hospital : you want for nothing—unlike Elijah you have not to rely upon the ravens.

Did I say '*quite*' free ? I wronged you there. A pound a week you shall have—nay, Jack, no less and I'll have no argument upon it. 'Tis a trifle. A pound a week, a whole pound. I insist—not a penny less—or more !

Best luck, dear boy,

Your loving Uncle,
LAURENCE VINING."

§ III

Among those whose strength had failed them on hearing the sentence of death passed upon John Plunket was his daughter Lil. The poor girl had borne herself bravely during the terrible weeks that had followed upon her father's arrest ; at first she never doubted that he would clear himself ; and even later when the evidence became clearer against him she could only think that the whole business was the result of a ghastly mistake and that her daddy—as he still was and always would be to her—would somehow or other prove to everybody's satisfaction that he was not the man they wanted after all. It was not till towards the very end of the trial that the dreadful possibility of his being convicted began to dawn

upon her. Beyond his conviction her thought refused to carry her. Then came the verdict and the sentence. She was stunned. At the words "hanged by the neck until you are dead," she fell forward and was caught—quite unconscious—in the arms of her brother.

Dr. Willing who had been sitting a few rows back had feared some such occurrence; he came forward at once and explaining to Tom Plunket that he was a doctor, helped him to support Lil out of the court. They took her to a little waiting room, and laid her on the floor, while the doctor ministered to her.

"It was the sentence," said Tom. "Those words. She isn't strong enough, you know."

"I know, I know," said Dr. Willing. "She oughtn't to have been here at all."

"She wouldn't leave me," answered Tom. "I wanted her to go over to her aunt. But she wouldn't. She said she'd rather be with me. You see, she didn't know what was going to happen." Tears stood in Tom's eyes.

The doctor turned to him and took his hand. "Courage," he whispered. "Try and stick it, for her sake. She's coming round. Stay by her - I'll get a cab."

Dr. Willing hurried off. When he came back he found Tom kneeling beside his sister holding her hand. Lil's eyes were half open, and she had returned to consciousness. Between them, they helped her into the cab and Dr. Willing accompanied them to an address in North London, where the girl's aunt lived. Dr. Willing ordered Lil to be put to bed at once, and gave Tom a pound to get anything that might be necessary. Tom thanked

him as best he could, and the doctor said he would call next day.

"And let me know," he added to Tom, just as he was leaving, "if there's anything you think I can do."

"What do you think about an appeal, sir?" asked Tom.

"You'd best see your solicitor about that," answered Willing. "You know where to find him, and all that?"

"Yes. I'll see Mr. Passmore as soon as I can"; then added quickly—"D'you think there's any hope?"

"We must hope for the best," said the doctor. "Try and keep your spirits up—for her sake, you know. Good-bye. See you to-morrow."

"Good-bye," said Tom, "and thank you."

Ben hurried away back to his home in Hampstead. Although he had been Vining's confidant all through the investigations that had led up to the trial, he had not been publicly associated with him—indeed Vining himself would not have figured before the public at all if he could have avoided it; but somehow or other his identity had leaked out as the man who had put Scotland Yard on to the scent, after their investigations had been officially closed. Ben, however, had succeeded in remaining entirely behind the scenes. Thus he was able to visit the son and daughter of the condemned man, without disclosing his association with Vining, whose identity was well known to Tom and Lil as the man who was responsible for bringing about their father's arrest. Had Tom known that the kind doctor had been hand in glove with their enemy Vining, they would have shrunk from him

as from a boa-constrictor whose deadly coils they would have expected to strangle them also, innocent as they were.

Ben's own feelings in the matter were simple. His work with Vining had been purely objective; he had been interested—intensely interested—in the ingenious methods his friend had adopted to unravel the mystery; but there was no question of his sympathies being engaged on Vining's side, much less on the side of the Law. The criminal had been clever. Vining had been cleverer. The question of right and wrong did not trouble Ben. His tolerance was in a sense almost anti-social. "Impossible," he would say, "to lay down a law for everybody. Bound to be injustices. Everything depends on the circumstances." Consequently when Vining's work was over, his sympathies were as free as they would have been if he had had no connection with the case at all. In fact, his knowledge of the whole affair and of the remorseless way in which the quarry had been hunted inclined his sympathies if anything towards the criminal. At any rate, whenever he saw human suffering he was prepared to disregard any law which might forbid him to alleviate it.

He reached home to find his sister reading the newspaper account of the closing scenes of the trial. Martha Willing was a middle-aged lady of great character. Her ideas had been gained in the hard school of experience—for the Willings had never at any time been well-off, and since the untimely death of old Mrs. Willing many years ago, the onus of running the household had fallen on the small but capable shoulders of Martha. She was small

of stature—in contrast to Ben who was large—but her features were strong, especially her mouth. It was a determined organ, which fulfilled its two-fold function—that of eating and that of speaking—with wonderful competence. Her opinions—like her mouth—were firm. She knew her own mind, and rarely changed it. But for all her dogmatism, she was a very kind-hearted woman and unlike most “practical” people did not claim omniscience. In her sphere she was supreme and her knowledge was supreme; but she recognised that this sphere was limited. It comprised, of course, all purely domestic questions to do with the household, and certain other general questions of social principle upon which she held strong and decided views; the latter class included marriage and divorce, drink, and exercise. Upon these subjects she knew what she thought, and she knew that what she thought was right. She was essentially a good woman, without any imagination. Hers would be the reward of the innocent.

Ben was under her thumb, and like a sensible man had given up trying to escape. On one question only was there ever any friction, and that was his friendship with Vining. For Martha regarded Laurence Vining as the incarnation of the devil; in her eyes he was not just only “not a good man,” he was positively evil. It was all she could do to tolerate his very rare visits to the house, and on these occasions she would quickly disappear leaving her brother to entertain his friend.

“Mr. Vining,” she would often say, “is not the sort of man that one wants to have anything to do with.”

That disposed of Mr. Vining.

"You must admit he's clever," Ben would say.

"That may be," Martha would reply, "but a man should use his brains for good ends, not for evil ones."

In connection with Vining's investigations into the recent "Shop Murder," Ben had submitted that it was surely a good object to assist the Law. Martha replied that it all depended on a man's motive. If Mr. Vining's real purpose had been to help the authorities, that would certainly have been to his credit. But he had had no such purpose. The fact that he had helped anybody had been purely incidental. His real motive was obscure, but anyway nefarious. In fact she questioned the propriety of Scotland Yard accepting the help of such a one in bringing even the wretched Plunket to justice, nor did she see any reason to alter her view of this matter, when on the morning following the final day of the trial, all the papers were loud in their praise of Vining.

"It is common knowledge," said the leading article in one paper, "that Scotland Yard were assisted in their investigations by Mr. Laurence Vining, whose recently published volume of *Essays in Criminology* has been hailed as one of the most original contributions to modern thought. While the Police authorities, upon whom rests the responsibility for the detection and arrest of criminals can claim and rightly claim credit for the protection of the public against malefactors and murderers, yet it is satisfactory to know that even the 'big five'—as the Chiefs of the C.I.D. are commonly called—are not above seeking and acting upon advice coming from unofficial

quarters in exceptional cases. It certainly speaks volumes for the public spirit of the country, when such eminent men as Mr. Vining leave their studies in order to assist in work of this kind, which however laudable its object may be, cannot fail to be distasteful to them."

"The writer of that article," declared Martha Willing, "has evidently never met Mr. Vining. I don't suppose the sordid business was distasteful to him in the least. And whatever his purpose was in interfering, it was certainly not just public spiritedness - you may be quite certain of that!"

Another paper wrote in connection with the "Shop Case": "The Public owe a debt of gratitude to Mr. Laurence Vining, the well-known criminologist. The amazing energy and skill he has shown in unravelling a mystery that had admittedly baffled Scotland Yard, can surely find a parallel only in the stories of Sherlock Holmes. . . ."

"I suppose they'll be calling you Dr. Watson next!" said Martha to her brother.

"It seems to me they wouldn't be far wrong if they did," answered Ben.

"I cannot understand why you have any interest in working with a man like that," complained Martha. "It isn't as if you really have anything in common; you're always telling me that most of his work is entirely beyond your understanding. And it seems to me that in this so-called detective work of his, he simply uses you as someone before whom he can show off. It isn't as if you could help him."

"Well, I don't know——" began Ben, very much mortified by his sister's home truths. But she would not hear him.

"Nonsense!" she exclaimed. "The idea of your being a detective! It's too absurd. You haven't got the brains—and thank goodness you haven't!"

There was no more to be said. There had never been a time within his memory, when his sister had not had the last word. He never expected praise from anyone, least of all from Martha; but he thought it a little hard that she should continually be rubbing in his own incompetence. On the whole, however, he put it down to her dislike of Vining.

§ IV

Laurence Vining lived in one of those old houses in Hampstead which are the envy of all those who do not realise how much they cost to run. His taste in furnishing was in favour of the *bizarre* and the oriental. Tapestries and Arabian rugs were hung in nearly every room: curios of all sorts adorned his mantelpieces and shelves—curios including precious metals, stones and jewels from all parts of the world. A great many of them he had inherited from his father who had been a notable traveller, explorer and antiquarian, and who had died when Laurence was a small boy. Most of his antiques—more particularly those from Egypt and India—were very rare specimens of their kind; some of them indeed were unique. It was rumoured in certain quarters that the means whereby they had been

acquired bore greater testimony to the collector's love of possession than to his respect or reverence for the places whence they were taken and that as a consequence the most horrible curse attached to sundry of the rather dusty articles now reposing in Vining's study. Needless to say for such theories Vining had the supremest contempt. He himself had travelled a good deal and had seen many lands. He had studied the habits and customs and religions of many people. These experiences had led him to discount superstitions of every kind, and to inquiring visitors he made no secret of the origin of some of his *objets d'art et de vertu*. "These rubies," he would answer casually, "they were the eyes of the Golden Buddha at——" or "this necklace was part of the treasure stored in the Temple at ——" or and this in the presence of Suleiman, his Malayan servant - "these plaques? They are from the tomb of one of the Sultans at Jahore, aren't they, Suleiman?" And then Vining would grin at the Malayan. But the Malayan would not grin: his face would be immobile, but in his eyes there would be fire and in his heart there would be anger.

Nearly the whole space on the four walls of Vining's study was taken up with books—it is true that there was a small area above the mantelpiece where, instead of books, there hung a collection of scimitars, knives, swords and daggers arranged in the shape or pattern of a star - but everywhere else there were books, and it was in these chiefly that Vining gloried. Some of the rarest and oldest editions were to be found on his shelves and he was a not infrequent visitor at Sotheby's sales.

It was in this semi-oriental atmosphere, rarified by learning and romanticised by art, that Laurence Vining, philosopher, writer—and willy-nilly amateur detective—lived and moved and had his being. If there was need of more “atmosphere,” it was certainly given by Suleiman, who waited on Vining hand and foot and stood between him and the outer world—Suleiman, the priest; Vining, the deity!

In addition and in contrast to Suleiman, there was Mrs. Bateman, the housekeeper, a matronly old soul, who was probably the only person in the world who looked upon Vining as a child. She had been with him for about a quarter of a century, first as Jack's nurse and then later on as Vining's housekeeper. Through all the difficult times between Jack and his uncle, she had retained Jack's confidence, and even after he had ceased to live in his uncle's house, he would frequently come back in order to pay Mrs. Bateman a visit. She ruled the rest of the household, which consisted of Suleiman and Grace Unthorne, the housemaid, with a rod of iron and a flow of words which would have been the envy of any public orator. Suleiman she frankly detested, and it was only the fact that a very clear line had been drawn between their respective spheres of activity that enabled the two of them to live at peace with one another in the house. Mrs. Bateman regarded Suleiman as a sly, creeping thing who was quite incapable of telling the truth and was certainly never to be trusted “same as you can trust a white.”

Grace, the housemaid, had not been long with Mr. Vining, and worked entirely under the supervision of

the housekeeper, who regarded her as much as a companion ("Every lady is entitled to a companion," Mrs. Bateman would say) as an assistant.

The Shop-murder trial had taken place during the latter half of July, it had been one of the last big trials before the end of the session. About three weeks after the trial, that is to say in the middle of August, on Monday 15th to be precise, Laurence Vining, clad in a purple silk dressing gown, was sitting at his breakfast table in a small room leading out of his study. This dressing-gown was a relic of his 'varsity days, when he indulged in such extravagances and generally prided himself on his taste in fine clothes. In those days he would wear a different suit every day of the week. In later days, however, he became much more careless of his appearance and would wear the same suit (usually blue serge) every day for weeks and months on end. He was short in stature, and perhaps he had come to realise that short men do not usually make good tailor's dummies.

For breakfast he never had more than coffee and rolls and he liked to linger over them, while he went through his post, which on this particular morning was more voluminous than usual. There were the usual invitations to meetings and dinners from various learned societies of which Vining was a member, or had been made an honorary member; there were book catalogues from dealers, and one or two scientific books for review. There were also a few uninteresting personal letters. He threw the latter aside impatiently. He hated banalities. But there was one letter in his post that interested him very much,

and it was this letter that he had just read when his friend Dr. Willing was announced. Without greeting of any sort Vining tossed the letter to him.

"What are we to think of that, my dear Ben?" he said.

Ben read the letter. It was in disguised manuscript and read as follows :

"DEAR MR. VINING,

I have followed every word of the Shop case from start to finish--the way you discovered the real murderer was too wonderful for words. If only you would use your powers to help me. I am in the most terrible situation and I *beg* of you to help me. If you knew the circumstances of my case I am *certain* you would not hesitate. It is a matter of life and death. I *cannot* explain in this letter. Meet me on Tuesday afternoon next at 3.25 *exactly* by the book-stall at Hyde Park Tube Station. *Do not be a minute late*. I shall be wearing a red hat. Follow me, but do not speak to me till I speak to you. I cannot write more now. I beg of you not to fail me. In great haste and distress.

RED HAT.

For God's sake come."

"A lady in distress," observed Ben, rather casually, as he put the letter down on the table.

"Maybe," answered Vining. "Maybe." He then became lost in thought, and Ben sat down. He himself was not particularly impressed or excited by the letter from

the lady in the red hat. He had heard of such appeals before, and as often as not they had turned out to be mare's nests. "Will you go?" he asked.

The question aroused Vining. "Of course I shall go," he said. "I wonder you ask. It isn't often that I get such a chance as this for exploring the byeways and vagaries of the human mind at first hand. I wouldn't miss it for worlds. If this letter is genuine, think what a study the writer's mentality will make! . . . Won't you come with me? It's to-morrow afternoon."

"I don't think I'd better do that," replied Ben. "I should be what they call a *tertium quid*, shouldn't I?"

"As you like. . . ."

"Unless," cut in Ben quickly, "unless you think you might want me? Unless I could be some help to you?"

Vining smiled. "I think I'm capable of looking after myself, thank you." His tone had a touch of the unfriendly about it—as if he resented the idea that he might want the help of another man in anything he did.

"Very well," answered Ben, rather sadly. All the same he made a mental note that he might be round about the place at the time just in case.

"I came to tell you," he went on, "that I saw Jack the other day."

Vining frowned.

"Now don't think for a moment," said Ben, "that he's asked me to plead for him or anything of that sort. You know him too well for that. What I'm saying is entirely off my own bat. He's a good fellow is Jack, and he hasn't had a particularly easy time of it. Going straight

from school into the trenches was no joke for him. It has meant that he's been four years behind hand with everything. The result is that he's got to an age when in the normal way he'd be earning his own living : instead of that he's just starting out on a profession and for three or four years to come I don't suppose he'll make a penny—unless things have changed very much in the medical profession since I was a young man—and I rather think they haven't. At the same time he's got to an age when he wants to marry. It's the most natural thing in the world." Ben paused and blew his nose.

"Well?" said Vining.

"Well," said Ben. "I know it's no affair of mine, but—is it quite fair of you to cut him off as if—as if he'd done something disgraceful? After all, you must make allowances."

"My dear Ben," said Vining. "I haven't cut him off, as you say, yet. I reduced his allowance a few weeks ago, as I considered that he was spending too much time gadding about instead of working. I must confess that his letter which I received a few days ago telling me he was thinking of getting married came as a shock to me. I wrote and told him at once that unless he gave up the idea he could expect nothing from me either now or when I am gone. And to that I stick. He is mad to think of marriage at present and if he will give up the idea of it, well and good; he shall inherit all I have. If not, then I have done with him for good."

"And if I may add one word before this subject is closed," Vining always became very formal when he was

serious, "there are many matters in which I would willingly listen to your counsel, but in this thing I must ask you not to interfere——" Vining was about to continue, but Ben interrupted him :

"Don't go on," he said. "I understand. You know your own affairs better than I do. We shall not quarrel over this matter."

"That is well," answered Vining. "What is it, Sulciman?"

Ben started and turned round in his chair to find Vining's Malayan servant standing in the doorway. Ben could never get used to that fellow's noiseless and eerie way of suddenly appearing from nowhere.

"Gentleman wishes speak with you," said Sulciman.

"Who is it?" asked Vining.

"Gives no name. Says he has important news for you."

Vining hesitated.

"Well, I will come," he said at length, and without a word left the room, followed by Sulciman. Dr. Willing, left alone, waited a minute or two in the breakfast room and then wandered into the study. The room where Vining was interviewing his strange visitor was quite near to the study, and in a moment or two Ben thought he heard voices raised in anger. He listened more keenly and he was certain now that the tones proceeding from the room were louder than those of ordinary conversation. Suddenly the door of the other room opened and he heard Vining say quite distinctly—"I'm finished with the whole business. Do your worst!" A few seconds later Vining strode into the study, looking heated and angry.

"What's the trouble?" asked Ben mildly.

"Leave me, leave me," said Vining hurriedly. "Please go."

Ben shrugged his shoulders and left, pondering many things in his mind. Rarely had he seen Vining so distracted. Their next meeting would undoubtedly be interesting.

§ v

Jack's feelings on receipt of his uncle's letter reducing his allowance to a pound a week were mixed. His dislike of his uncle was intensified by the latter's meanness: on the other hand the less he received from his uncle, the less was he under any obligation to him. The situation would have been very different had there existed any natural love between uncle and nephew. But there did not. Consequently Jack regarded gifts from his uncle much as his uncle himself regarded them, as things involving obligations. The smaller the gift, the smaller the obligation. For some time Jack had left his uncle's letter unanswered: at length, fortified by the feeling of independence which grows upon all proud men the poorer they become, he had written to his uncle acknowledging this letter with thanks, and informing him that he was seriously thinking of getting married. His uncle's answer was short and to the point, to wit, either he must give up all idea of marriage or else he must give up all idea of ever receiving another penny from his uncle now or at any time. There was also a brief homily on the

absurdity of marriage and especially Jack's marriage. This homily had made the young man really furious. His uncle, he argued, had a perfect right to dispose of his money as he liked, but he had no right whatever to butt in in matters upon which he, Jack Ransome, was solely competent to decide. He forthwith wrote again to his uncle putting this point of view in no uncertain terms, and telling him that whatever doubts he may have had about marriage were now dispelled, and that he was going right ahead with the business. This letter he posted on the morning of Monday, August 15th. Vining received it the same evening and immediately sent the following note which Jack received on the morning of Tuesday, August 16th :

" DEAR JACK,

You have chosen your own path. So be it. I had intended to leave my fortune to you. As it is I shall leave it elsewhere. Your allowance also will be stopped.

LAURENCE VINING."

Jack's first feeling was one of relief. He at once telephoned to Pamela and asked her to lunch with him. At first she was unwilling to do so, but ultimately she yielded to the urgency of his invitation, and they met at a small restaurant in Sloane Street. Jack had intended to go straight to the point as soon as he met her. But he found that the atmosphere of the restaurant was against him, and, what was more important, that Pamela was not in a " helpful "

mood. She was more than usually reserved, and distant, and though she remained quite friendly she was not disposed to discuss the matter that was nearest to Jack's heart. On the whole the lunch was not a success; they got through it rather hurriedly and Jack insisted that they should go into the Park, as he had something very important to say to her. It was a hot day, and the sun poured down upon them out of a cloudless sky. They sat down in the shade.

"Pam, I simply must talk to you," Jack began.

"Talk away," said Pamela.

"Not if you're going to be like that."

"Like what?"

"You know, old thing, as well as I do. Do be serious, Pam."

"Jack," said the girl in a more serious tone, "I don't want to have to be annoyed with you on a glorious day like this. If you'll only be sensible we can remain quite good friends. Otherwise. . . ."

Although Pamela meant to speak kindly, she could probably have said nothing more calculated to whip the already excited young man into a state of fury, than the last word she spoke.

"'Sensible'! 'Friends'!" cried Jack. "How can you talk like that? How can you ask a man to be healthy when he's diseased. How can you ask me to be sensible when I'm madly, overwhelmingly in love with you! Don't you realise that I'm desperate and that you're all I care for in the world and that if you won't marry me"

"Oh, please, *please* I beg you not to go on!" pleaded Pamela, very serious now.

"Only *say* that you'll marry me and I'll stop. I don't ask any more than that now. Pamela, surely you can give an answer . . . I offer you my whole life . . ."

"If you press me now," answered Pamela quietly, "I can only give you one answer."

"You refuse me?"

"Won't you wait, Jack, till later on when things are . . . have calmed down."

"Wait! I've done nothing all my life but wait. Surely, *surely* you can say yes."

Pamela shook her head. "No Jack, I can't. It's quite impossible. I'm very *very* fond of you . . ."

"For God's sake don't use that word!" cried Jack. "I suppose there's somebody else. I suppose I'm not good enough! Is that it, eh?"

"Don't be silly," replied Pamela, "and don't jump down my throat every time I say something nice about you."

"Is there anybody else?"

Pamela paused before replying. At length -

"Is that a fair question Jack?" she asked.

"Is it Vining?" The rage and anguish in his voice were hardly suppressed.

Pamela gave no answer.

"My God!" he muttered. "So that's where matters stand is it!"

"I haven't said so," said Pamela quickly.

"Vining's rich," went on Jack ignoring her, "and

I'm poor. I never thought you'd look at things in that light. I suppose it was silly of me to imagine that ---"

"Jack, you're being horrid," interrupted Pamela. "I begged you not to talk to me about marriage and you took no notice. And when I say I can't give you the answer you want you fly into a temper and—and say all sorts of wild things . . ." She looked at her watch. "It's after two o'clock. I must be going." She got up from the seat. "Now let's be good friends before we part. Let's forget this afternoon." She held out her hand to him.

There was a certain grimness about Jack's manner as he shook hands with her.

"Good-bye," he said. "I shan't forget this afternoon. And I don't think you realise where this business is going to end."

"Don't be dramatic, Jack."

"I'm not being dramatic. I'm damned serious."

"Damned serious," echoed Pamela mimicking. "Cheer up! you'll be all right." She waved to him and was gone.

For a moment he stood gazing after her. Was she really as heartless as she sounded? Certainly she was not the Pamela that he knew. Was she trying to hide something? Was she *really* in love with Vining? She couldn't be . . . and yet . . .

Deep in thought he walked back to St. George's. Mechanically he wandered through the long passages of the hospital, and upstairs to his room. He sat down wearily on his bed still wrapped in thought. Then he grew restless and began pacing up and down the room.

It was hot. He flung open the window and leaned out, resting his elbows on the window sill. Everything was very quiet. There was not a soul about in the courtyard below.

* * * * *

Some distant clock had already struck half-past three when Jack seized his hat and ran downstairs. In the corridor he came across Archie Ferrand, one of his fellow house surgeons.

"Hullo, Ransome," said Ferrand. "You're in the devil of a hurry. What's the game?"

"A damn silly one," replied Jack without stopping. "Don't you go setting up a hue and cry!"

Ferrand watched him as he dashed out of the hospital.

"Poor old Dasher," he thought to himself. "Wonder what he's up to now."

PART II

THAT same evening, that is to say on the evening of Tuesday, August 16th, the day on which Jack and Pamela had been lunching together, Dr. Benjamin Willing reached home in a very much excited—not to say hysterical—state.

“Look, Martha, look at this!” he thrust the evening paper under the astonished eyes of his sister.

“What on earth’s the matter with you, Benjamin?” exclaimed Martha. “I’ve never seen you in such a condition before.” And to tell the truth the doctor’s plight seemed a very serious one. His eyes were dancing with excitement, his hair was dishevelled, and his hands were shaking.

“Read!” he said. “Read!”

Martha put on her spectacles and read the headline which ran: “Charlie’s forthcoming visit to England.”

“Well,” she began. “I don’t know who Charlie is but there doesn’t seem to be any excuse for . . .”

“No, no,” cried Ben, “not there, not there. There.” His trembling finger pointed to a paragraph in the late news section of the paper, and Miss Willing read as follows:

TERRIBLE DISCOVERY IN TUBE LIFT
WELL-KNOWN CRIMINOLOGIST
FOUND DEAD

Mr. Laurence Vining was found dead this afternoon in a London tube lift in the most amazing circumstances. The terrible discovery was made about 3.30 by a lift man at Hyde Park Tube Station. As one of the lifts descended to the bottom the lift man and a passenger who happened to be standing near by saw a figure apparently leaning against the further iron gate of the lift. As the lift came to a standstill the gate automatically opened and the figure, losing support, fell heavily forward out of the lift. Quickly releasing the near gate, the lift man and passenger ran across the lift to find that the prostrate figure had been stabbed in the back. The lift man at once gave the alarm and the man was carried to St George's Hospital where he was immediately identified as Mr. Laurence Vining, the famous criminologist. It is understood that Scotland Yard were at once communicated with and now have the matter in hand.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Martha. This was her strongest expletive used only on the most provocative occasions.

"But that isn't all," panted Ben. "That isn't the worst!"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, the passenger——"

"What about him?"

"*I* was the passenger!"

"*You* were the passenger! Good—good gracious!" Martha herself was really excited this time. In vain she searched for a stronger exclamation. "Good gracious!" she repeated. Suddenly she seemed to collect herself. She took off her spectacles and sat down opposite her brother.

"Now, Ben," she said very seriously, "there's only one thing for you to do. Tell me all about it from the beginning—from the *very* beginning."

The poor man was so obviously agitated by his experience and so distressed at the loss of his friend, that he found it hard to make a coherent story.

"Well," he began, "I got out of the tube at Hyde Park Corner. No one else got out of the train except me. Would to God someone else had! I walked along the tube passage to the lift and reached it just before the downcoming lift came to a standstill at the bottom. The lift man—I mean the ticket collector was there as well. When the lift got to the bottom there was a man in it: he was leaning against the further corner of the lift. I thought I recognised the figure, although his back was turned to us. Then the further door—the iron gate—you understand, swung open automatically, and the man just toppled over and fell down on the ground just to the other side of the lift."

Ben paused.

"Go on," said his sister quietly.

"Well, the man—the ticket-collector saw it too. He

was pretty well bowled over, I can tell you. He swung open the near gate and we both rushed across the lift. The hat had fallen off and I saw at once that it was Vining. There was a dagger plunged nearly up to the hilt into the small of his back. His pulse had stopped. He was dead."

"Go on," said Martha again, as Ben paused. "What happened then?"

"The man—the ticket-collector—wanted to draw the dagger out at once, but I had recovered myself sufficiently to realise that it was a police matter, and that on no account must anything be touched. I sent him immediately for the police. A constable was on the spot almost at once—wonderful fellows those policemen—so calm and collected! He took notes about the whole situation. In the meantime they had sent round to the hospital for a stretcher. Then we carried Vining round to St. George's."

"And he's there now, I suppose?" asked Martha.

It did not seem to be a matter of the first importance where Vining's body was at the moment, but Martha was dazed by what she had heard and asked the first question that came into her head. A sudden thought occurred to her:

"Does Jack know?" she asked quickly.

"No, he was not there. I waited some time in the hope of seeing him. But he didn't come and they told me at the lodge that they didn't know when he'd be in. So I came home."

"But I thought you were going to St. George's specially to see him," said Martha.

"That was the idea," answered Ben. "But he was not there."

"But does this mean," went on Martha, who had hardly grasped the whole situation, "that you will have to give evidence?"

"Of course I shall have to give evidence."

"Oh, how dreadful!" exclaimed his sister, who, in common with all sensible people, had a hearty dislike of anything to do with Courts of Law.

"What will you say?"

"Don't be so silly, Matty," said Ben irritably.

"But they always twist everything about so in law courts, Ben. They might get you to say anything."

"Well," answered Ben with conviction. "They can't make me say anything more than I've seen with my own eyes. What else is there for me to say?"

"But they'll ask you why Vining killed himself. What'll you say to that?"

"Well, I shall say very emphatically that he didn't kill himself." And then Ben added thoughtfully, as if speaking half to himself, "He couldn't have done. It's impossible."

"But, my dear man," protested Martha. "I understood from you that there was no one in the lift with him!"

"That is so."

"Well then, how could anybody else possibly have killed him?"

At any other time Ben would have rallied his sister on her tardy arrival at the point, but he was not in a mood to do that now. He replied simply to her question.

"I do not know, Martha."

There was another pause. Then another thought struck her.

"What about the man at the top—who let him into the lift?"

"I saw him."

"What does he say?"

"He says that Vining—he didn't call him Vining, he called him 'the gent'—he says that he saw the gent walk into the lift, in the ordinary way, and that he was sure that there was nothing whatever the matter with him. As there were no other passengers waiting he sent the lift down. That is all he knows."

"Do you mean to tell me," said Martha, as if she were finally disposing of the thing as hopelessly impossible, "Do you mean to tell me that a man can go into a lift safe and sound, and be killed by somebody who disappears before the lift reaches the bottom! Why the thing's absurd—it's fantastic!"

"It doesn't matter how you describe it; there it is."

"But, Ben," persisted Martha, "are you *quite* sure Mr. Vining was alone in the lift?"

"Quite sure."

"There was no one hiding . . . hiding. . . ."

"Yes," said Ben encouragingly, "hiding where?"

"Well, hiding round some corner or other," suggested Martha hesitatingly, "or perhaps," she went on quickly, "there was someone hiding in the lift itself, and you were so intent on looking at Mr. Vining ~~that~~ you didn't see him—I mean you didn't see the other man."

"I think that's hardly possible. Remember there was another man with me—and *he* didn't see anybody else."

"Well, how do you account for it?"

"I don't know," said Ben slowly. "I must think this thing out. There must be some . . ." he broke off. "Poor old Vining," he muttered at length. "That this should have happened to him of all men! That he should come to meet his death in such a strange fashion, when he himself had spent so much of his time discovering the strange ways in which other men had met their death! Who is there now that will solve this mystery? Who can do for Vining what Vining cannot do for himself?"

There was a long pause, broken suddenly by Ben springing up.

"Martha," he exclaimed, "I must do this thing."

"You must do what thing?" asked the startled lady.

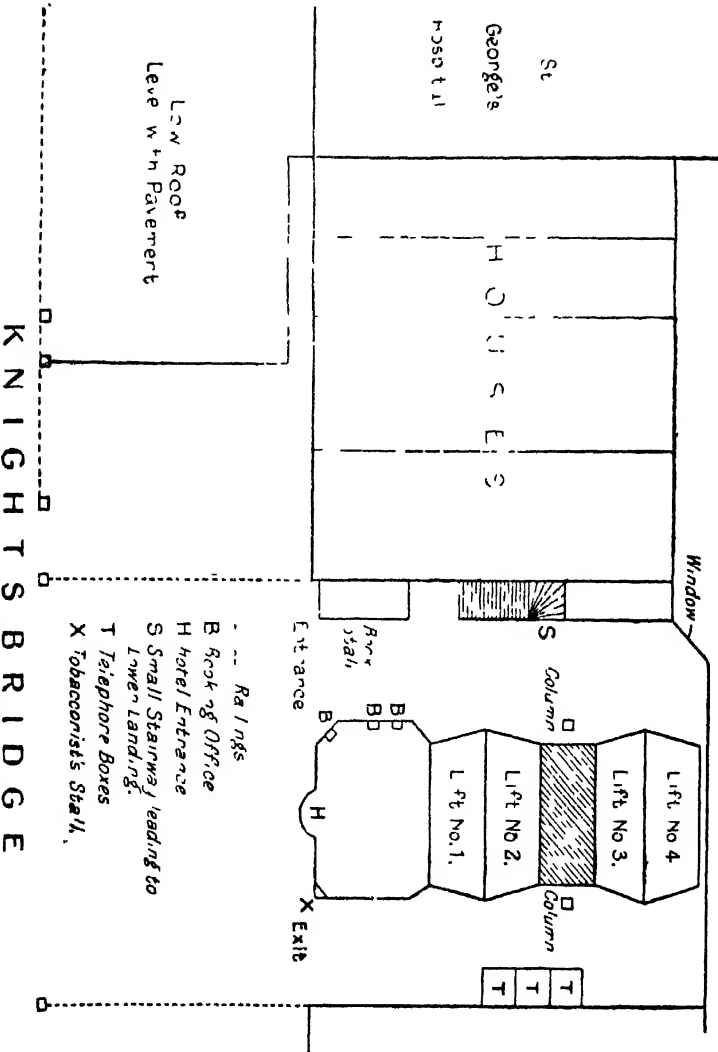
"I must discover the secret of Vining's death. Have I not worked with him? Do I not know his methods? Have I not watched him a hundred times as he has gone to work, scenting and ferreting out the truth, sifting it from the false? His mantle has fallen upon me. . . ."

"Nonsense!" interrupted Martha loudly. "What on earth are you talking about, Ben? You're quite beside yourself."

"You think I'm not clever enough, don't you?" cried Ben.

"Yes, and what's more I know you're not," said his sister. Poor Ben! He would never die of flattery.

"Well!" he said solemnly "we shall see. I'm going to do my best. I owe it to . . . to poor old Vining."



KNIGHTS BRIDGE

LOW ROOF
Leve with Pavement

- - Railings
- B Rocking Office
- H Hotel Entrance
- S Small Stairway leading to Lower Landing.
- T Telephone Boxes
- X Tobaccoists Stall.

§ II

A few words will suffice to give the reader an idea of the scene of Laurence Vining's death. Hyde Park Corner Tube Station stands well back from the main road, which is known as Knightsbridge. It is within a few doors of St. George's Hospital, which occupies the commanding position of Hyde Park Corner. The station has one entrance and one exit. As you go in at the entrance you have a book-stall on your left, and the booking-office on your right. Beyond the booking-office on your right, you have four lifts. Beyond the bookstall on your left, that is to say opposite the lift, you have a short stairway, which leads to a landing on the floor below where a gentleman's lavatory is situated. From this lower landing also you can proceed to the great spiral stairway, which leads to the lower station and debouches into a passage at the bottom near the lifts themselves; this spiral stairway is really for emergency purposes, but is sometimes used by people who are in a hurry to get down, when no lift is available. The entrance passage of the upper station ends in a wall, wherein is built a corner window which lets light and air into the back of the station. If you go in at the exit of the station, you first have a small tobacco stall on your left. Beyond that, on the left, are the lifts. Opposite the lifts, that is to say by the right hand wall, are three public telephone boxes. Passengers travelling by the tube have first of all to buy their tickets at the booking office (unless of course they have season tickets); they then proceed to the lift and have their tickets clipped by the liftman who

stands outside the lift. When the passenger or passengers have gone into the lift, the liftman closes the gates from outside and sends the lift down, but he does not go down himself. On arrival at the lower station, the exit gate of the lift swings open automatically and the passenger or passengers walk out and down the passage towards the trains. The entrance gate of the lift is then opened by another liftman who is waiting below, on the entrance side of the lift, and who admits the passengers waiting to go up. He then closes the further as well as the near gate, and sends the lift up. He remains below.

Between the entrance and exit of the station, there stands the front entrance to a hotel, which is built above the station. A person standing on the pavement of Knightsbridge directly opposite and facing the station, would be about twenty paces from the entrance of this hotel. On his left would loom St. George's Hospital.

"It's a thousand pities," observed Detective-Inspector Widgeon of Scotland Yard, "that the body had to be moved." He was standing almost in the exact spot where Vining's body had fallen, that is to say just outside the lift-shaft at the bottom, on the *exit* side of the lift. "A thousand pities, that's what it is," he repeated.

"I realise that, sir," said P.-C. Scandreth, who had been the first policeman to arrive on the scene. "Still, I couldn't very well leave it here—in a public place—till you arrived. Besides——"

"Besides what?" asked the detective-inspector.

"Well, I thought there might have been just a chance

of 'is bein alive. It's true the doctor said he was dead, but you never can tell, can yer? I've 'eard some doctors——"

"Yes, all right," interrupted Widgeon curtly. "Well, now just explain to me exactly what you saw."

The P.-C. got out his notebook, and with the aid of his notes made the following statement :

"At 3.35 p.m. on Tuesday, 16th August, whilst I was on duty at Hyde Park Corner, I was told by a tube official that there was a man as had been found dead in the lift at Hyde Park Tube Station. I come at once to the station and goes down in the lift. When I reached the bottom I see the body lying face down with a knife or dagger inserted into the back."

"Inserted" is good, thought the detective, but said nothing.

"'E was lying," continued the constable, "with 'is 'ead pointing away from the lift, and 'is feet about a foot from the edge of the lift shaft. 'Is fists was clenched as if 'e had been fightin'. Lying near the body was a hat and a mackintosh belonging to the deceased——"

"How do you know the mackintosh belonged to the deceased?" asked Widgeon.

"It had the initials 'L.V.' inside the collar. When the deceased was identified as Mr. Laurence Vining, I put two and two together --"

"Well, go on," said Widgeon. "Anything else lying near the body, or in the lift?"

"No," answered the constable, "nothing else. I searched all round and in the lift as well. Standing near the body was a group of people."

"How many?" asked the detective.

"Three, to be precise. They gave their names as Dr. Benjamin Willing, Cyril Hawkins (mechanic), and Kate Pancut (independent). I took statements from all three."

The constable then read Dr. Willing's statement which amounted to very much the same as he had told his sister, namely that he was waiting with the ticket collector for the lift to come down, that he had seen the body leaning up against the corner of the lift and had seen it fall out on to its face as the gate had swung open; that he had found the body to be quite dead and had immediately sent for the police. The statements of the other two, Hawkins and Pancut, were to the effect that they had come up from the station to the lifts and had found Dr. Willing waiting beside the prostrate body, and that shortly afterwards the body had been removed to St. George's Hospital.

The detective-inspector had turned his attention to the two ticket collectors, the one who had been on duty upstairs and had admitted Vining to the lift, and the other who had been on duty downstairs, when the lift had descended.

"What's your name?" he asked the upstairs man.

"Fred Beacham, sir."

"Well, Beacham, tell us what you know about this affair."

"Precious little I'm glad to say," said Fred "The murdered party was quite all right when he walked into the lift at the top. I clipped his ticket, and as there was

no other passengers waiting—things is usually pretty slack in the early afternoon—I closed the gate and sent him down.”

“Did you see him actually standing in the lift before you sent it down?” asked the Detective.

“Yes, sir.”

“What was he doing?”

“He was just standing.”

“Facing you or with his back to you?”

“Well, as far as I remember he had his back to me and was looking at the advertisements in the lift—as so many people do. But I can’t say as I *really* remember, you know, sir.”

The Inspector stroked his chin.

“You are *quite* certain that there was no one else in the lift besides this gentleman?”

“Absolutely certain, sir,” said Beacham without hesitation.

“You could swear to that in a court of law?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’ll *have* to, you know!” said Widgeon with a significant look.

“Yes, sir,” replied Beacham, unperturbed.

“Someone may have gone into the lift without you seeing them, you know,” suggested Widgeon.

“Well, but I’d have seen them in the lift before I sent it down, wouldn’t I?” argued the ticket collector.

“You might not have done. Another man might have been in a corner—in the dark where you couldn’t see him.”

"But the lift was lighted," answered Beacham, "and there weren't no dark corners for no one to hide in. Besides," he added with finality, "even supposing there *was* another man besides the party what was murdered, where did 'e get to if 'e weren't in the lift when it landed at the bottom? That's what I want to know!"

The detective-inspector ignored the question, and there was a slight pause. Then he turned to the downstairs ticket collector.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Jim Rolfe, sir."

"Well, Rolfe, let me hear your side of the story."

"Well," began the man, "I was on duty downstairs. All the lifts was up at the moment, but there was no passengers waiting below. Then one of the lifts started to come down and at the same time I see a passenger coming along the passage from the station. The passenger came to where I was standing just as the lift was nearing the bottom, and we stood looking at the gate and waiting for it to come. When it comes, we both see the figure of a man leaning like, with his back to us, against the fur corner of the lift. As the fur gate swings open, the figure falls down. So I opens the near gate and we rush acrost the lift to where the man was lying, with a knife stuck in 'is back. Stuck in pretty deep it was too; you could only see about 'alf a inch of the blade. 'Good God,' I says, 'stabbed in the back!' I says. It's a 'orrible thing," went on Rolfe, "to see anyone stabbed in the back. It ain't sporting-like. Now a bloke what sticks you in the front - that's different."

"Well?" said the detective, "what happened then?"

"Well, I didn't rightly know what to do, never 'aving 'ad a death in the lift come to me notice before. I thought the only thing to do was to fetch the police, which I accordingly did. The doctor remained in charge of the body —"

"What doctor?" asked Widgeon.

"The passenger who was with me, 'e was a doctor. 'E felt the deceased's pulse and found 'e was quite dead."

The Inspector nodded.

"So I comes up in the lift and fetches the first p'lice-man I comes across."

"Did you see what sort of dagger had been used?" asked Widgeon.

"Well, it weren't no ordinary one," replied Rolfe. "The handle was all carved with figures, leastways, it was carved with something. I never see'd one like it before."

"What colour was the handle?"

"White. Ivory, as you might say."

The Inspector nodded, and turned once more to the police-constable.

"Well, Scandreth," he said, "you got to the point of taking statements from Dr. Willing, Cyril Hawkins and Kate . . . Kate . . . ?"

"Pancut, sir," put in Scandreth.

"Kate Pancut, yes. Curious names some people have," observed Widgeon.

"Yes, sir," agreed Scandreth.

"Well, what did you do after that?"

"I ordered Rolfe here to keep the lift standing where it was, and not to use it for any purpose whatsoever until further orders. Then between us—that is between the doctor and me—we lifted the body on to a stretcher that had arrived from the hospital, and took it up in that lift." Scandreth pointed to one of the other lifts. "And so marched with it round to St. George's, where it lies now, sir."

"What happened to the others, the three people from whom you took statements?"

"Dr. Willing gave me his card. I took the names and addresses of the other two."

The constable then handed over Dr. Willing's card to the detective, and also a piece of paper with the other two names and addresses on it.

"Let's have a look at the lift itself," said Widgcon.

The detective spent some time examining the interior of the lift. He started on the floor and examined every inch of it and carefully collected all the bits of paper, cigarette ends, etc., that he could find. These he put in a small tin box he had brought with him. He then went over the two side walls very carefully, testing all the advertisement frames to see if any of them were loose. They were all fixed quite tightly, and none of them showed the least sign of having been interfered with. He then examined the little side door in what may be described as the "inner" wall of the lift, that is to say the wall which is nearest to the middle of the shaft and which would be almost contiguous to the wall of the other lift in the same shaft when the two lifts were side by side.

This little door, as the ticket collector explained, was an emergency opening ; in the event of the mechanism going wrong and the lift stopping between the upper and lower landings, the other lift which was in the same shaft would be brought level with it, and the emergency door in each lift would be opened and the passengers would walk from one lift to the other. The ticket-collector had never been aware of any occasion on which these emergency doors had been used. Although it seemed pretty obvious that no use could have been made of the emergency door on this occasion, nevertheless for the sake of thoroughness Widgeon had the door opened. It had to be forced open with some difficulty, and the dust which had lodged in the interstices between the edges of the door and the wall of the lift bore thick testimony to the unused state of the aperture.

Widgeon next turned his attention to the ceiling of the lift. A pair of steps was brought from the station, and the detective "went over" every inch of the ceiling, growing blacker—both metaphorically and literally—as his search proceeded. He was not normally an irritable man, but Fred Beacham's observation that there was still a cobweb in one corner that he hadn't wiped off, did not contribute to the detective's good humour.

"You shut your mouth," said Widgeon glaring at him, "and go and fetch me a basin of water!"

The wash which he gave himself was perhaps premature, for having completed his examination of the inside of the lift, he had it sent up the shaft until the roof of

it was level with the top landing. He then got on to the roof, made a thorough examination of that, and then ordered the lift to be lowered slowly while he examined the circular wall of the shaft. This circular wall was shelved with curved iron girders; it might have been possible for a man to stand on one of the shelves, provided that he were facing the wall and holding on tight with both hands to a higher shelf; even that position he would have found hard to retain for any length of time; to stand in any other position—with one's back to the wall for example—would have been quite impossible. Every ten yards or so there was a straight cross girder, which just allowed the lift to pass and which "cut off," as it were, an outer edge of the circular shaft up and down which the lift ran. As the lift itself was more or less rectangular, and the shaft circular, there were therefore spaces between the outer edges of the lift and the circular wall; and in one of the spaces, perched on one of the straight cross girders, a man might have stood unharmed while the lift passed. Widgeon examined these cross girders with the greatest care, and though he found much dirt and much debris, it was apparently all undisturbed dirt, and among the debris, which consisted of empty cigarette boxes, match boxes, bits of paper and the like, there did not seem to be anything that might have been a clue. Nor could Widgeon trace anything like a foot-print or a hand mark on any of the girders.

In short, his examination of the lift and of the shaft yielded him no useful information that would help him to solve the problem. On leaving the tube station, how-

ever, he issued orders that the lift in which Vining was discovered was to be kept closed.

The detective-inspector then went round to St. George's Hospital to view the body. The mortuary of the hospital is a kind of cellar, half underground. Usually when bodies are brought in, they are wrapped in a shroud and laid in a coffin. The police, however, having given instructions that Vining's body was not to be interfered with in any way for the present, it lay on a trestle table face downwards fully dressed and with the dagger sticking into the back, just as it had been found. Beside it was Vining's hat and light mackintosh.

Widgeon and one of the hospital doctors stood looking at the body for some time. Certain parts of the clothing seemed to be rather more disarranged than they ought to have been, even allowing for a fall or for a journey on a stretcher. The collar for example was badly crumpled and the tie was badly askew. The hat too—a wide brimmed soft felt one—was very much damaged. The damage to the hat might have been due to the fall; still, as Widgeon observed for a third time that day, "it was a thousand pities that the body had to be moved." At the police officer's request the doctor extracted the dagger; he carefully avoided putting his hand on the handle, so as not to disturb any finger-prints that there might be on it; he jerked the dagger out, holding the joint between the blade and the handle with his forefinger and thumb. The dagger was certainly a remarkable weapon, not to be seen every day. The handle was of carved ivory, and the blade, which was straight and made of very white steel, fitted

into it by means of a socket spring. Neither the doctor nor Widgeon had ever seen such a dagger before, and the doctor remarked on its beauty as he handed it to the inspector. The latter placed it carefully in a special case he had with him for the purpose of preserving any fingerprints there might be. The doctor then turned the body over and examined the face. There was a large bruise on the point of the chin.

"What do you make of that?" asked Widgeon, indicating the bruise.

The doctor looked at it carefully. The skin was actually broken in one place.

"That was probably done with the fist," said the doctor, "though whoever did it may have used some kind of a knuckle-duster."

"Would the blow have caused death?" asked Widgeon.

"Hardly," replied the doctor. "It was certainly a very severe blow, but I do not think it would have caused death. In any event the death in this case is due to the knife wound."

"You're certain of that?"

"Quite certain. No doubt at all," answered the doctor.

"Could this be a case of suicide?" asked Widgeon.

The doctor considered, and then said slowly, "Well, I suppose it's just possible for him to have stabbed himself in that place. But it's extremely unlikely."

"It seems to me we're dealing with unlikely things in this case." There was almost a touch of grim humour in the detective's voice.

"For one thing," continued the doctor, "I doubt if

he could have driven the knife so far home—especially after receiving such a blow on the chin. In the second place, it's more than likely that his hand would still have been on the handle of the knife when he was discovered—although of course the fall may have caused the hand to lose its grip and jerked the arm forward. I understand the arms were spread out when he was found on the ground?"

"Yes, I believe so," replied Widgeon, "but I'll make sure of that. Anyway, on the whole, judging from the position of the wound, you rule out suicide?"

"I don't rule it out entirely, but I say it's extremely improbable."

The detective-inspector then searched Vining's pockets and placed the contents—which consisted of a handkerchief, a pocket case with some pound notes in it, a few keys and some loose coins—in his bag.

"Scandreth," he said, turning to the police-constable who was with him, "get hold of Dr. Willing and ask him to be good enough to come to the Yard as soon as he can. I'm going there now."

And after thanking the doctor, the detective-inspector left the hospital.

§ III

Widgeon reached Scotland Yard about 6.30 in the evening and had not long been in his room when Dr. Willing was announced. The two men shook hands.

"I am sorry," began Widgeon, "to have troubled you to come along . . ."

"Not at all," answered the doctor. "By a curious coincidence I was just putting on my hat when your telephone message came. I was in fact coming down to Scotland Yard. Quite apart from any information I may be able to give you about this horrible business, I feel I owe it to my old friend Laurence Vining to do all I can to bring the murderer—if, as I assume, it is a case of murder—to justice. As you know Vining has often helped you people here and his knowledge and his brains have been of some use to you, I imagine. I don't know whether it is generally known that in nearly all of his investigations I shared his confidence. He told me everything he did; he let me see his brain at work, as it were, and naturally I became pretty well acquainted with his methods and processes."

"Quite so," observed Widgeon.

"Well, what little experience and knowledge I have gained through working with him—it may not be much, but such as it is, I want to put entirely at your disposal. I want, Inspector, to work with you, if I may, in getting to the bottom of this business!"

"I shall certainly be grateful for any help you can give me," replied Widgeon. "Of course, I'm in charge of the investigations, and I have some very experienced men under me. You'll understand that I shall have to work in my own way."

"Of course," agreed Willing.

"But, in so far as you can help, I shall rely upon you."

"Good," said the doctor.

"Well, now," went on Widgeon, "first of all let me put some questions to you."

"By all means."

"I think I've got the story pretty well fixed. But just to get things quite clear, perhaps you'd give me your version, leaving out nothing—however trivial or unimportant it may seem to you."

Dr. Willing then narrated exactly the same facts that he had given to his sister only an hour before. When he had finished, the detective asked him if, as a friend of the late Mr. Vining, he knew of any circumstance or incident which could possibly have led up to the events of that afternoon.

"Well," replied Dr. Willing, "there is certainly one, and there are perhaps two incidents which I ought to mention. They both occurred yesterday. I happened to visit Vining just after breakfast, before I started on my round. He was going through his letters as I came into the room, and there was one which he showed me. It was an anonymous letter, signed 'Red hat,' telling Mr. Vining that the writer was in great trouble and asking him to meet her (at least I assume it was a 'her') outside Hyde Park Tube Station at 3.25, this afternoon."

"That's very relevant," said the detective. "Go on, Doctor."

"Yes, it was 3.25 they were to meet—not a minute later. I made a note of the hour, because although Mr. Vining did not wish me to accompany him, he wanted me to be within call—in case, you understand?"

Ben knew that his statement was not strictly in accordance with the facts ; for Vining had made it clear that he had no need of his friend's help whatever. However, Ben's misrepresentation was perhaps pardonable in the circumstances, particularly as he wanted to impress upon the detective the important part he played in Vining's life, in the hope that his services on this occasion would be more acceptable.

"Perfectly," nodded Widgeon.

"As a matter of fact, I didn't attach much importance to the letter at the time, and I don't believe Vining did either. I wasn't even certain that Vining would keep the rendezvous, but I thought I might as well go in case he did so. That, of course, is why I was at Hyde Park Corner at all. If only I had been five minutes earlier !"

"Do you know where the letter is now ?" asked Widgeon.

"I assume that Vining either had it in his pocket or else left it at home."

"It wasn't in any of his pockets," said Widgeon.

"It's probably on his desk in his study then."

"Was it manuscript or typed ?"

"Manuscript"

"Postmark ?"

"He didn't show me the envelope."

The detective made a note

"I think you said," he went on, "that there were two incidents you had to mention. What was the other ?"

"It occurred almost immediately after he had shown me the letter. A man came to see Vining. I don't know

anything about him, who he was or where he came from. Vining saw him in another room. The interview didn't last long, and when the door of the other room was opened I heard Vining say 'All right, do your worst,' or words to that effect. When Vining came back to the room where I was, he appeared to be very angry, and told me to go away—a very unusual, in fact an unprecedented thing for him to say to me."

"And you've no idea who this man was?"

"None at all, but Suleiman—that's Vining's manservant, you know, a Malayan—Suleiman saw him and might be able to give us some information. I was going to ask him myself the next time I called."

For some minutes the two men were silent and nothing could be heard save the tick of the official clock on the mantelpiece, and the distant hum of the traffic.

"Well, now, Dr. Willing," said the detective at length. "Your information has been very useful so far. I wonder if you can help in the matter of motive. What possible motives could there have been for this murder—if it was a murder?"

"I'm afraid I can't be much use to you there," replied Willing. "Of course, although Vining was a great friend of mine, I wasn't blind to his faults. Everybody has his faults to a greater or less degree, and perhaps Vining's were rather more obvious than most people's. He was a difficult man in many ways—very difficult. I don't believe that he had very much sympathy or liking for his fellow-creatures, and he certainly wasn't afraid of giving offence. He wasn't just bluff or rude—people can usually put

up with that sort of thing. He was polite—devilishly polite—and sarcastic. And sarcasm's a quality that doesn't go down with English people, you know. The consequence was that he had few friends and I think he may have had many enemies."

"Do you know of any enemy in particular?"

"I don't know of anyone in particular," said the doctor after thinking for a moment.

"Who gains by his death?" asked Widgeon.

"It seems to me the whole world loses," replied Ben seriously.

"You misunderstand my question," said the detective gently, realising perhaps that "gains" was hardly the tactful word to use in view of the overwhelming sense of loss felt by the doctor.

"I meant, who benefits financially from Mr. Vining's death? Who for example is his heir?"

"Well, his natural heir is his nephew, Jack Ransome. He had no wife and I know of no other near relatives. But of course all that depends on his will."

"We must get to know," said the detective, half to himself, and made another note.

"This Mr. Ransome——" he went on.

"Captain Ransome," interrupted Willing. "He was a captain in the army during the war; and he's still called Captain, though, as a matter of fact, at the hospital, they call him plain 'Mister'."

"How old is he?"

"About twenty-six I should think."

"Very young for a captain," commented Widgeon.

"Yes, he did extraordinarily well. Joined up in 1916 straight from school and went out to France the same year. Got his company and captaincy in 1917. D.S.O., M.C."

"Bit of a fire-eater, eh?" suggested the detective.

"They say he didn't know what fear was."

"The reckless sort; I know 'em. What's he been doing since the war?"

"As soon as he left the army, he went up to Cambridge and read medicine. He's at present a house-surgeon at St. George's."

"At St. George's?" echoed Widgeon. "Is he there now—I mean this afternoon? I've just come from there. I didn't see him."

"I don't know exactly where he is at this moment. I asked for him myself when I was at the hospital this afternoon. But he wasn't in then."

The detective picked up the telephone on his desk and told someone to ring up St. George's Hospital and find out if Captain Ransome was there, and if so to put him through at once.

"Where are Captain Ransome's parents?"

"He has none," replied the doctor. "They both died when he was a baby. He was born out East and I've heard that just at the time of his birth his father was murdered in some mysterious way, and that the shock killed his mother."

"So that for all intents and purposes Vining has been *in loco*?"

"*In loco*, precisely," said Willing, politely adopting the detective's quaint abbreviation.

"And how did they get on together?"

"Much as most sons and fathers do, I suppose," said Willing. "There were differences, of course. I don't think Jack liked being dependent on his uncle — what young man does? And I don't think Vining altogether approved of Jack."

"In what way?" asked the detective.

"Well, Jack was never a brain-worker. He didn't take much to his medical work, and found difficulty in passing his exams. I think he was fonder of riding!"

"And I suppose his uncle told him he was frittering away his time?"

"That's about it."

"Any other differences? Ransome's not married, I take it?"

"No, not yet. But it was in the wind."

"Uncle approve?"

"No. I'm afraid not. In fact ——" Willing hesitated.

"In fact what?"

"Well, I'm afraid they had a bit of a dust-up about it."

"When?"

"Only a few days ago. In fact they hadn't cleared up the business when this occurred."

"Who was the girl?"

"Vining's own secretary."

"Name?"

The doctor was beginning to get a little uncomfortable. After all it wasn't his business.

"Need we drag her in, Inspector?"

"I must have all the facts," said Widgeon dryly.

"Well, I'll mention the name to you, but I hope it won't get into the papers."

"It won't get into the papers yet, anyway," Widgeon assured him. "Besides," he reflected, "I could easily find out the name of Mr. Vining's secretary, you know!"

"True," assented Willing. "Pamela Jackson is the young lady's name. And a very nice young lady she is too."

"Was her engagement announced?"

"No, not so far as I know. In fact I'm not at all sure that they are engaged."

"I see," said the detective leaning back in his chair and twiddling a small pencil between his forefinger and thumb. "I see," he repeated. He no doubt wished that he really did see.

"Well," he said at length, "I'm going up to Mr Vining's house now to have a look round. Perhaps you'll come with me?"

"Certainly," replied the doctor and got up.

"There are just one or two things to do before we go," said Widgeon. At that moment the telephone bell rang. It was a message to say that Captain Ransome was not at St. George's Hospital, but was expected back at any moment.

"When did he leave the hospital?" asked Widgeon down the phone.

"In the early afternoon," replied a voice.

"Well, look here, Beccles," continued Widgeon, "I'm going out now, up to Mr. Vining's house at Hampstead. I hope to be back in about an hour and a half to two hours. Get hold of Captain Ransome as soon as you can, and once you've got hold of him don't let him go—see? I want to see him here to-night, you understand? I must see him to-night. Anything to report?"

There was a pause while Widgeon listened.

"All right," he said presently, "don't lose any time."

Detective-Inspector Widgeon then left Scotland Yard and accompanied by Dr. Willing went as fast as a high-powered police car could take him straight to Vining's house in Hampstead.

§ IV

"Just fancy!" Mrs. Bateman was saying (it was a favourite expression of hers) "Just fancy! He goes out of the house hale and hearty, and the next minute he's dead—for ever! Snuffed out like a candle! Why," she went on, pointing to a tray of dirty crockery that was on the kitchen table, "why, there are the very things he was eating off. I can't hardly bring myself to have 'em washed up. It seems so . . . so final." The old soul dabbed her moist eyes with the edge of her apron.

Grace Unthorne who was sitting with her in the kitchen said nothing. While Mrs. Bateman evidently found consolation in talking, Grace seemed incapable of uttering a word; indeed, ever since the news of Vining's death

had reached the household, she had been as one struck dumb.

"For goodness sake say something!" continued Mrs. Bateman, "instead of sitting there moping. I never did hold with people moping. Put it into words is my motto. Get it off your chest."

"What's done is done," muttered Grace.

"Well, just think of me," went on the housekeeper. "Six and twenty years I bin with Mr. Vining, I have. Six and twenty years. And how long have you bin here? Not six months! Pull yourself together, for 'eaven's sake. It's bad enough having that nigger crawling about the place at a time like this, gibbering and spluttering like an empty syphon of soda. Talk and you keep sane is what I say. Now look at Sooliman" (Mrs. Bateman was of course speaking metaphorically, as the Malayan was not in the room), "'e's shaking an' quivering all over, same as if it was winter. If he wasn't a nigger I should say he was just ill, but with these 'ere blacks you never know. Shouldn't be surprised if he was holding something up one of those long sleeves of his all the time. Why, do you know—Lord 'a' mercy, what's the matter with the girl! Are you going to have isticks?"

Grace had suddenly collapsed into a flood of tears, and had buried her head in her arms on the kitchen table. Mrs. Bateman got up and bent over her, patting her gently on the back.

"There, there," she said "Don't take on so . . . it ain't your fault. I ain't blamin' you. 'Ere, I'll get you a drop o' brandy."

Grace recovered herself and wiped her eyes.

"No . . . I don't want any brandy . . . I'm sorry." She gulped. "I got a bit of a headache to-night. If you don't mind, Mrs. Bateman, I think I'll just go out for a stroll. The fresh air'll do me good."

"Well, you do as you like, my dear. Myself, I should have thought bed was the proper place for you, 'specially as you've been out most of the afternoon. But please yourself. Won't you let me get you a drop of something though? As a rule, I'm against young girls takin' spirits, 'cept on occasions . . ."

But Grace interrupted her gently.

"No, thank you," she said. "I'll just take a short turn. I'll not be long."

To tell the truth, Mrs. Bateman's oratory had got thoroughly on the poor girl's nerves, and she wanted to free herself of it, if only for a quarter of an hour. She went quickly upstairs to put on her things, and had just come down to the hall again when the front-door bell rang. She opened the door to find Widgeon and the doctor on the door-step.

"Ah, Grace," said Dr. Willing, as he and Widgeon came in, "I've brought along this gentleman to look over one or two of Mr. Vining's things. We'll just go into the study. We don't want to be disturbed."

Willing purposely avoided mentioning the police to the girl for fear of unnecessarily alarming her.

"You're going out, I see?" went on the doctor kindly.

It was one of those "obvious" questions which people

inevitably put when they see someone with their hat and coat on.

"I wonder," said Widgeon rather suddenly, "if you would mind not going out just yet. I rather think I may want you to do something for me a little later on, if you wouldn't mind—that is to say if you haven't got anything you particularly want to do outside?"

"Certainly, sir," answered Grace. "I was only going for a short walk."

"Just so," went on Widgeon. "Well, if you wouldn't mind waiting in, I should be obliged. I don't suppose I shall be very long."

The two men disappeared into Vining's study. Grace was somewhat put out by the strange man's request; he certainly spoke with an authoritative air, and she wondered vaguely who he might be. But she was too tired and overwrought to care much. She went back to her room, took off her hat and lay down on her bed.

The inspector gave Dr. Willing no opportunity for asking any questions, but came straight to the main point of their visit.

"Now where would that letter you spoke of be?" he asked immediately.

"I imagine it might still be in his desk," replied the other.

They both searched the desk, first the top, then all the drawers, but without success. They then looked in all the other likely places where papers might be kept, but they found no trace of the letter. From the study they went into the little breakfast-room, where Willing had

first seen Vining with the letter. Their search there proved equally futile.

"Where else might we find it?" asked Widgeon.

"It's hard to say, without searching every hole and corner of the house."

"I shall have that done anyhow," observed Widgeon.

"But you know of no place where we might hope to lay our hands on it?"

The doctor shook his head. "No, I don't," he said, "unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Unless one of the servants might know. Grace, the housemaid, for instance, might have seen it when she was dusting."

"Well, we might as well see her before we go any further. We might also get something out of her about the mysterious person that called here on Saturday."

"I'll fetch her in," said Willing, and left the room, leaving the detective alone.

Although Widgeon was a man of considerable experience, and usually knew his own mind pretty definitely, nevertheless he wondered whether on this occasion he was on the right track. Here he was, miles from the scene of the murder, with the murderer still at large and probably miles away too: it was true that a considerable section of his C.I.D. staff were busy pursuing various lines of enquiry, and keeping an eye on the movements of certain well-known characters of the underworld. But, after all, Widgeon reflected, motive was the all-important factor and that was just what he himself was trying

to get at. He wondered whether they had managed to get hold of young Ransome yet. Dangerous sort of fellow that, mused Widgeon. Been in the war and pretty prominently too—at an age when impressions counted for a good bit. Once get the idea that you're not morally responsible for your actions, that you can blame it all on to the chaps up top, and there's an end of law and order. What had the war done? It had simply given all those young fellows carte blanche to go out and kill people—they must be Germans, of course; but still, they were people all the same. It didn't mean that you hadn't killed somebody because that somebody happened to be a German. You *had* killed, and what was more, you not only weren't hanged for it, you were actually patted on the back. Quite right too, all the same, it was a dangerous precedent to set. Where did it lead? This wave of crime was one of the results, and murderers—common or garden murderers—tried to excuse themselves by saying “It was the war.”

Widgeon had not long to wait before Grace was ushered into the room by Dr. Willing.

She was a pretty girl of about twenty-five, and was obviously very nervous. Dr Willing and the detective between them managed to put her somewhat more at her ease, but though they questioned her closely it was evident that she had no knowledge of the whereabouts of the missing letter.

“Well now,” said Widgeon, “let's leave that and come to another subject. Do you remember on that same morning that a gentleman came to see Mr. Vining?”

Yes. Grace remembered that.

"Do you know who this gentleman was?"

"No, sir," replied the girl. "You see, I didn't answer the door that morning, but . . ." she hesitated.

"But what?" asked Widgeon quickly.

"I think Mrs. Bateman might know who he was."

"Why?" asked Widgeon.

"Well, I think she saw him."

"Mrs. Bateman is the housekeeper," explained Willing.

"Who else saw him?" asked Widgeon.

"Well, I don't know if Suleman did."

"I see," said Widgeon. "I think I'd better see Mrs. Bateman. Would you be good enough to ask her to come in?"

Grace left the room much to her relief.

§ v

"Seems a harmless sort of a girl that," observed Widgeon. "Wonder why she appeared to be so frightened. By the way," he went on, "what was Mr. Vining's idea in employing a Malayan servant?"

"Vining had a great love of the Orient," answered Willing. "He liked the reticence of the easterner—it was something akin to his own reticence."

"How long had he been with Mr. Vining?"

"Close on thirty years I should think—over twenty-five anyway."

"Mrs. Bateman's the housekeeper, you say?"

"Yes. She's been with him nearly as long as Suleiman has. She came originally as Jack's nurse. She has looked after Jack ever since he was a baby, and then when he left here, she stayed on as Vining's housekeeper. She's a very good soul is Mrs. Bateman."

At this moment the lady in question appeared. She walked boldly into the middle of the room, and stood with her arms akimbo and looked challengingly at Widgeon as much as to say "Now that the master's gone I'd have you know that *I'm* in charge here."

"The managing sort," thought Widgeon. "I shall have to go carefully."

"Won't you sit down, Mrs. Bateman?" he added aloud. Widgeon was anxious not to waste time, and he judged that he could most easily get what he wanted from her by appearing to be in no hurry.

"I prefer standing," said Mrs. Bateman. "I sits down in my own kitchen, but I've never been used to sitting down in any of the other rooms--not that I couldn't sit down if I wanted to, mind you. But Mr. Vining never encouraged it and no more did I. Stand up when there's work to be done, that's my motto. Time enough to sit down at other times. My husband died of sitting down too much 'e did. He was always sitting down, specially when. . ."

But the particular occasions which the late Mr. Bateman chose for sitting down were not disclosed, for Widgeon, seeing clearly that he had adopted the wrong tactics, quickly adopted others.

"You're quite right, Mrs. Bateman," he exclaimed,

interrupting her with a suddenness that startled her. "Quite right. Now let's get to business at once. I like people to go straight to the point as you do. Cast your mind back to yesterday morning. Just after breakfast a gentleman came to visit Mr. Vining I think?"

"Well, so many people come to see Mr. Vining, it's hard to remember at a moment's notice any one in particular like that. Now, let me see," she rattled on, "to-day's Tuesday, yesterday would be Monday. Now yesterday there was but two to lunch. Dr. and Mrs. Barnett. Dr. Barnett the great scientist you know. He's written several books and he came to discuss . . ."

"Yes, yes," cut in Widgeon sharply. "But I want you to think about the morning, before lunch, you know. After breakfast in fact."

"Well now, let me see. The morning, you say?"

"Yes," said Widgeon testily. "The morning."

"We shall get there in time, Mister—I don't think I quite caught your name."

"Widgeon. Detective-Inspector Widgeon of Scotland Yard." He had at first considered it better to suppress his identity, lest the servants should hesitate to open their mouths before him. In the case of Mrs. Bateman he hoped that the announcement of his title might have the reverse effect.

"I see I must mind my p's and q's Mister Detective-Inspector! Well, all I can say is that there's no one in *this* house as 'as had anything to do with killing Mr. Vining, nor knows nothing about it either. If there was, it would be me, 'cos I knows everything that goes on in

this house. And as for any visitors, well that's as may be."

"Yes, but who was the visitor that called at breakfast time yesterday?" The detective was still patient.

"Must I give you his name?"

"Yes," said the detective eagerly. "You must."

"Well, it was Dr. Willing," said Mrs. Bateman triumphantly.

Ben Willing, who had been listening with some amusement to the contest of words between the house-keeper, whose volubility was well-known to him, and the detective, could restrain himself no longer, and burst out laughing.

"Of course I was here," he said, "but Mr. Widgeon means who was the gentleman who called to see Mr. Vining when Mr. Vining and I were both in the breakfast room talking. You remember that someone called then, don't you?"

"I don't know as anybody else called," answered Mrs. Bateman.

"Oh come!" protested Willing. "You've just told us that you know everything that goes on in this house."

Mrs. Bateman pursed up her lips and, for once in her life, remained silent.

Willing pursued the advantage.

"I'm sure you want to help us discover how Mr. Vining met his death," he urged. "Any information you give this gentleman will be strictly confidential and may be of great consequence. Your name won't be mentioned."

"And why won't my name be mentioned I should like to know?" exclaimed Mrs. Bateman. "The name of Bateman . . ."

"Yes, yes," added the doctor hurriedly. "Of course it shall be mentioned, if you want it to be mentioned. Only you must tell us what you know. The time's running on and every minute may be of the greatest value. Who was the gentleman?"

"But how do I know that I'd be doing right in telling you?" asked the housekeeper.

"Now you know me well enough, don't you, Mrs. Bateman? I tell you it's not only right, but it's your positive duty to tell us."

"Well then," answered Mrs. Bateman, "I *do* know who it was that called here to see Mr. Vining yesterday. And I'll tell you. It was Colonel Robinson, as nice a man as you'd ever want to meet."

She folded her arms across her ample bosom and looked from one man to the other with a now-you-know expression, which seemed to suggest that she had not only shed a devastating illumination on their present problem, but had solved the whole mystery surrounding Vining's death.

"Who is Colonel Robinson?" asked Widgeon.

"He's a particular friend of mine," said Mrs. Bateman.

The detective saw at once that it would be a hopeless waste of time to worm from her any reliable information concerning the identity of Colonel Robinson. It would be much quicker to see the Colonel himself.

"Where does he live?" he asked.

Mrs. Bateman looked at Dr. Willing. "Should I say that too?" she asked.

"Certainly, certainly, Mrs. Bateman," answered Willing.

"Well then, the blood be upon *your* head, Dr. Willing. He lives at . . . at . . . 'There now, I've forgotten his address! Just fancy! But I'll get it for you at once.' And the old housekeeper bustled out of the room muttering, 'Just fancy! I shall be forgetting my own name next!'"

Mrs. Bateman, having been assured of her ground by Dr. Willing, whom she trusted, assumed an air of mysterious importance and when on the way up to her room to find the address she was questioned by the excited Grace Unthorne, she refused to say a single word about her interview much to Grace's disappointment. In a few moments she returned to the study

"48a Sloane Street 'That's the address,'" she announced.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Bateman," said the Detective. "I don't think we need trouble you any more just at present. By the way, I think there is another servant in the house, isn't there?"

"There are two servants in this house," said Mrs. Bateman. "There's Grace and Suleiman. And over and above them there's me."

"Ah, yes, quite," replied the detective. "I should like to see Suleiman, if you would be so good as to send him in here."

Mrs. Bateman left the room and the two men were left alone.

"Whew!" observed Widgeon. "I thought you said that Mr Vining liked to have reticent people about him!"

Dr. Willing laughed. "I think Mrs. Bateman was in a privileged position," said Willing.

"Who's this Colonel Robinson?" asked Widgeon. "Do you know anything about him?"

The doctor thought for a moment before answering.

"I don't remember ever having heard of him," he said at length. "I know several Robinsons—but none of them could possibly be connected with this business. And yet in some vague way . . ."

He paused, evidently trying to remember when if at all—he had ever heard of this particular Colonel Robinson.

"No," he said finally, "I've never heard of him"

There was a silence. An unseen observer would have said that the two men were deeply engaged in studying the pattern on the carpet.

Suddenly the door burst open and Mrs. Bateman rushed in panting.

"Please, sir," she exclaimed, "Suleiman ain't there."

Widgeon looked up. "Do you mean," he said, "he's not in the house?"

"Yes, sir," answered Mrs. Bateman. "He's disappeared. He was here an hour ago—just before you came: that I'll swear to."

"Have you been all over the house?" asked the detective.

"Well, I bin up to his room, and 'e wouldn't be anywhere but there."

At Widgeon's request, Mrs. Bateman took the detective over the house. It was not large, but the arrangement and appointment of the rooms showed clearly that its owner was a man of considerable taste as well as wealth. Dr. Willing had certainly been right in describing Vining as a lover of the Orient. Rarely had Widgeon seen such luxurious apartments, so exquisitely and yet so exotically furnished. In every room there were so many curios, *objets d'art*, clocks, ornaments, weapons of all kinds, antiques and the like that the place almost resembled a museum; and yet so artfully had every object been placed, and so delicately had every colour scheme been worked out that there was a sense of harmony and of repose pervading the whole house. It was a home that anyone would have marvelled at, but in which few perhaps would have had the æsthetic sense to be at ease.

Detective-Inspector Widgeon rubbed his chin as he gazed at some of the rooms; searching every hole and corner of this house, he thought, would be no easy job.

Suleiman's room was not particularly distinguished, but seemed to interest the detective nevertheless. On the bed lay the Oriental clothes which—according to Mrs. Bateman—it was the Malayan's almost invariable habit to wear on all occasions, both indoors and out in the streets. He had an ordinary suit, she said, but didn't care for wearing it very much. The Vining always preferred him to wear his native dress wherever he went. Mrs. Bateman had no explanation to offer of the fact that

Suleiman had evidently discarded his favourite dress; the detective said nothing, but merely rubbed his chin again.

"I want nothing in this room touched," he said to Mrs. Bateman. "Do you understand?"

Mrs. Bateman understood. Widgeon then rejoined Dr. Willing in the study.

"I'm going out now," said the detective. "Let me see, Doctor, you live in these parts, don't you? I suppose you're on the phone?"

"Yes, rather," replied Willing. "Hampstead 0035."

The detective made a note of the number.

"I'd offer you a meal at my place with pleasure," went on Willing, "but if you're in a hurry . . ."

"It's kind of you, Doctor, thank you," replied Widgeon. "but I think I'd best get a sandwich somewhere. I don't want to lose a moment more than I need. But thank you all the same."

The two men were in the hall about to take their departure, when there was a prolonged ring on the front-door bell, accompanied by knocking. Dr. Willing opened the door. On the doorstep stood Pamela Jackson.

§ VI

Pamela was obviously very much upset, and her discomfort was not relieved when Widgeon introduced himself as a Scotland Yard Detective, and observed that she was the very person he wanted to see.

"I should like to ask you a few questions if I may," said Widgeon.

"Oh please let me off just now, Inspector," pleaded Pamela. "I don't feel fit for anything. This dreadful business -" she broke off and sank into a chair.

Inspector Widgeon was a kindly man, and was genuinely sorry for the girl. At the same time, she might give him some very useful information. There was a short pause, and then a thought struck Dr. Willing.

"How would it be," he suggested, "if Miss Jackson and I had a quiet talk together. We're old friends, you know, Inspector, and . . ."

He looked at Widgeon as much as to say "I'll get what information I can out of her and let you know." Widgeon hesitated a moment but finally agreed, on the understanding that the doctor would bring her down to be interviewed at Scotland Yard on the following morning. He then took his departure, and Pamela and Dr. Willing were left alone.

For some moments neither of them spoke. Pamela seemed very much overwrought and Willing hesitated to break in upon her thoughts. At length she looked up.

"I'm glad that detective's gone," she said. "To think that such a dreadful thing should happen to Mr. Vining of all people! I can hardly believe it."

"When did you last see him?" asked Willing.

"Why, I was with him here in this room only this morning. It's - it's incredible."

"Does he show you all his letters?" Dr. Willing's question was unexpected.

"Some of them. Why?"

He then told her about the anonymous letter Vining had received on the previous day, and asked her if she had seen it.

"No," said Pamela without the least hesitation. "I've never seen the letter. It's curious, because it's just the sort of letter he would have shown me. It would have interested him."

"Where would he have put it?"

"Well, he was rather careless about papers usually," answered Pamela, who seemed momentarily at any rate to have forgotten her distress and to have become quite interested. "Usually he would give them to me to sort out; sometimes he would leave them on his desk, or in a drawer."

"This anonymous letter can't be found," announced Dr. Willing somewhat grimly. "We've searched everywhere in this room."

"It's certainly very strange," mused Pamela.

"Do you know of any reason at all why such a letter should have been written to him?"

"None at all."

There was a pause.

Then Dr. Willing, speaking slowly and deliberately, asked Pamela another question.

"Can you imagine any reason or motive that anyone may have had for killing Mr. Vining?"

"I cannot," replied Pamela with equal deliberation.

"Did you know," went on Willing, "that a stranger called here yesterday—just after breakfast—to see Mr. Vining?"

"No. I hadn't heard of any stranger calling. Who was it?"

"A certain Colonel Robinson, I believe. Have you ever heard of him?"

Pamela thought for a moment.

"Well, it's a common enough name," she said at length, "but I can't connect it with anyone in particular."

It seemed evident to Dr. Willing that Pamela was not likely to shed any new light on the mystery. He wondered what other questions Widgeon would have put to her if he had been present. Then he thought of Jack. He did not quite know what the position was between Jack and Pamela; anyway he must go carefully and feel his way.

"This'll be a dreadful thing for Jack," he ventured.

Pamela coloured deeply and said nothing.

"I tried to see him myself when I went to the hospital this afternoon. But he was out and they didn't know when he was coming back. I am sorry, because it would have been better for me to break the news to him than for him to hear casually. I asked one of his friends there, whom I had met before, to watch out for his return and break the thing gently to him, and to tell him that he was to come up to our place to-night if he wanted to. But I'm afraid he may have seen it in the paper, before getting back to the hospital. I suppose you haven't seen anything of him?"

Pamela was fearing that he would ask this question. As soon as she had read of Vining's death in the evening paper, she had at once tried to get hold of Jack at the hospital and had been told—what apparently everybody

else had been told—that he was out, and that nobody knew where he was, or when he would be coming back. Since then she had telephoned several times, but had received the same answer. As the evening wore on, a terrible fear had gripped her. She knew Jack's temper and his recklessness. She reproached herself: she ought to have been kinder and more gentle with him. And yet, in the midst of her worst fears, she could not *really* bring herself to believe that Jack was capable of—of such an act. She also comforted herself that her apprehension was merely the result of her thoughts, and was not supported by a shred of evidence. His absence was surely just a coincidence: yet it was hard to explain now that the news of his uncle's death had spread far and wide. Her thoughts were now in a hopeless tangle. She hardly knew why she had come to Vining's house. Partly perhaps she had come in the hope of finding Jack there: partly too in case Vining had left some message, some clue . . . In any event she felt, as so many worried and distracted people feel, that she had to keep on the move. She must walk and walk, and wear herself out physically, then she might force herself to escape by sleep from her mental agony. She would gladly have poured the whole business out to her friend Dr. Willing, had she not come across him in company with that horrid inspector from Scotland Yard: as it was, she felt that he was in some way or other "taking a hand in the investigations." Dreadful thought—that she of all people should say anything that might make things more difficult for Jack.

"Don't worry to talk if you don't feel like it," Dr. Willing was saying.

"Where do you think Jack can have got to, Dr. Willing?" she asked in an anxious voice.

"Why, there's no doubt at all that he's at the hospital by now," answered the doctor.

"Could you ring up and find out?" suggested Pamela.

Dr. Willing went at once to the telephone. He came back a few moments later.

"No," he said. "It's strange—he hasn't been heard of since the early afternoon."

"Oh, it's terrible, *terrible!*" cried Pamela.

"My dear," he said kindly. "Why not tell me all about it?"

"There's nothing to tell," Pamela was sobbing by now. "I mean—I mean—things are too much for me. Please take me home . . ."

* * *

The good doctor had much to think about, as he walked away from the house where Pamela lived towards his own home. In the midst of life—he thought, how true that is! The papers would be full of Vining for the next few days, and then—oblivion! Would Vining's work live? He thought not. If posterity thought of him at all, they would remember only the manner of his death. Well, that might be something! More than most men get anyway.

A man shuffled up behind him.

"Spare a copper, mister."

Poor devil, thought the doctor.

"Down and out, eh?" he said.

"Yus, guvnor . . ."

Willing gave him a coin and hurried on. 'Down and out'! Well, well . . . his thoughts wandered on to other 'down and outs.' He wondered how those Plunkets were getting on.

Dr. Willing spent longer than usual in writing up his diary that night.

PART III

“IT seems to me,” remarked Martha Willing at breakfast the next morning, “that you’re wearing yourself out, Ben, over this case. You’re not looking at all well. You ought to take a complete rest. Why not go away for a bit?”

“Go away!” retorted Ben. “How can I, when all this is going on? I’m one of the most important witnesses.”

“You certainly seem to be most important,” admitted Martha. “All those telegrams yesterday. . . .”

“They’re not important,” said Ben. “They’re only messages of sympathy.”

“There was actually one from abroad this morning,” went on Martha.

“What, a message of sympathy?”

“No, a telegram.”

“A telegram from abroad?” exclaimed Ben. “Where is it? Why haven’t I seen it?”

“Well, I wasn’t going to show it to you until you’d had your breakfast. I wanted you to . . .”

“Where is it?” demanded Ben.

Martha got up from the table and took a foreign telegram from her bag and handed it to her brother.

"It came first thing this morning," she explained, "while you were in bed."

Ben tore it open and read it.

"Well?" said Martha.

"Only another message of sympathy," answered Ben in a disappointed voice, "from one of my old patients, now living abroad."

He folded the telegram up and put it in his pocket.

"Well, I must be getting along. I promised to take Pamela Jackson down to Scotland Yard this morning."

"Why has she got to go down to that place? Do they think *she* did it? I'm sure if *I'd* been a policeman," added Martha, "I should have caught the murderer by now!"

"Perhaps there's more in this case than you think," replied her brother mysteriously. He promised his sister faithfully that he would be home to dinner, and then left.

He found Pamela all the better for her night's rest, but still obviously very much troubled.

"I've spent a wretched night," she exclaimed. "I simply don't know what to do. What do *you* think has happened to Jack?"

Dr. Willing shook his head solemnly. "I don't know, my dear. He hadn't returned when I rang up the hospital this morning. But he *will* come back. I'm sure he will."

Pamela sighed.

"What am I to tell the inspector?" she asked.

"The truth," replied the doctor. "Tell him all you know. It'll be best in the end, whatever happens."

They hardly spoke again till they reached the Yard,

where they were at once shown up to Inspector Widgeon's room.

"Good morning," said the inspector to them both. "Very good of you to come and see me, Miss Jackson. I promise I shan't keep you long," he added genially. "Don't expect you've been to the Yard before, eh! Sit down, won't you? A chair for you, Doctor."

The inspector was a thick-set man, and filled his own chair as one might say to overflowing, and as the chair was a high one, his feet did not touch the ground; they rested on a little block he had had specially constructed, under his table. He liked to "sit high" so that he could have some advantage over the person he was interviewing, who was always placed in a low chair by the inspector's table. Inspector Widgeon would always stoutly deny that he ever used anything approaching the 'Third Degree' in the course of his examinations, but he had been known on occasions, when he could not get the information he wanted, to send men away "in order to think things over." They were allowed to think things over under lock and key, and though they were well looked after during their detention they were not released until the necessary information was forthcoming, or till the inspector was satisfied that they had no information to give. He had heard it suggested that this procedure was open to criticism, but he could not understand the point of view of people who made such suggestions. The end, he argued, justified the means, especially in the service of the law. On the whole he was a kind man, but his view of human nature was tinged with the cynicism which very few men can escape who

have to deal with the underworld. He believed nothing that he was told and only half of what he saw, and had found that rule to work very well.

However, there was no question of dealing with the underworld at this interview, and he adopted his suavest manner.

"Now, Miss Jackson," he began, "I just want you to tell me, quite simply, in your own words, what you know about this sad affair, and any facts which you may be aware of and which you think may help us to solve the mystery of Mr. Vining's death."

"Mr. Vining's death is as much a mystery to me as to everyone else," replied Pamela.

"You were his secretary, I believe?" said Widgeon.

"I was."

"In that capacity you naturally knew something of his private affairs."

"Not very much."

"You do not know of anything that was worrying him, any unusual circumstance that was troubling him at all?"

"No."

"You know of course that he took a great interest in crime and criminals."

"Yes."

"And that he was instrumental in bringing several criminals—murderers and the like—to justice?"

"I believe he was."

"Criminals are a dangerous crowd, Miss Jackson: and people who make it their business to suppress them often

run considerable risks. In other words, Mr. Vining may easily have made a good many enemies in the criminal world. Did you ever come across any evidence of this kind of thing?"

Pamela thought for a moment.

"No," she said slowly. "I don't think I ever did. But that's not to say that he did not make enemies of the sort you speak of—or of any other sort for that matter."

"He was good at making enemies, eh?" suggested the inspector.

"Well, Mr. Vining was not an ordinary man. He didn't mix very well with his fellow-creatures. He didn't seem to care much for popularity."

Widgeon picked up a long black ruler from his desk and toyed with it.

"Was he in the habit of receiving anonymous letters?"

"Certainly not in the habit. I believe he did get one or two."

"What did he usually do with them?"

"He was interested in them. They seemed to intrigue him. He would follow them up if possible."

"Why did they intrigue him?"

"I think he wanted to discover the state of mind of a person who would write an anonymous letter."

"Cast your mind back," went on the detective, not failing to observe the twinkle in the doctor's eye at the trite phrase, "to last Monday—to the day before yesterday that is. Did Mr. Vining tell you that he had received an anonymous letter that day?"

"No."

"He didn't mention anything about it to you? Not even that he'd lost it?"

"No."

"Tell me, Miss Jackson, you know the servants in Mr. Vining's household?"

"Quite well."

"Have you ever noticed anything peculiar or unusual in the behaviour of any of them?"

Pamela seemed a little puzzled at this question, as did also Dr. Willing. She thought for a moment before answering.

"No. I don't think so. Of course Suleiman was always a bit of a mystery—but then an easterner always seems so to any European."

"The other servants were quite ordinary?"

"Oh quite. Mrs. Bateman talks rather a lot. . . ."

"I've noticed it," said Widgeon with a smile. "And Grace Unthorne, she was quite ordinary too?"

"Yes, as far as I could see. I never noticed anything peculiar about her . . . I don't think much of her taste in literature."

"Why do you say that?" said Widgeon quickly.

"I didn't mean it seriously," laughed Pamela. "Once we caught her reading a book called 'Passion's Plaything'—but I believe most servant girls read that kind of thing, don't they?"

Widgeon smiled and continued to toy with the ruler. He was approaching more delicate ground.

"Captain Ransome is a friend of yours, I think, Miss Jackson?"

"Yes," answered Pamela, in a low voice.

"When did you last see him?"

"I had lunch with him yesterday."

If the detective felt any surprise he certainly evinced none.

"He invited you to lunch with him, I take it?"

"Yes."

"When did he invite you?"

"Yesterday morning; he rang me up."

"Do you often lunch with him?"

"Not very often."

In answer to further questions, Pamela told him where they lunched on the previous day, and how they went and sat in the Park afterwards.

"Was there anything peculiar or unusual about his behaviour while he was with you?"

There was a slight pause.

"No," said Pamela.

"What did you talk about?" asked Widgeon.

"Lots of things."

"Things in general, and nothing in particular, eh?"

"Yes."

"He didn't seem to have anything on his mind?"

"No."

"You're quite sure of that?"

"Quite sure."

"I shouldn't like to think," said Widgeon, "that you're not being perfectly frank with me, Miss Jackson. It's in *his* interest that you should be, as well as in your own you know."

Pamela said nothing, and there was another pause.

"Come," continued Widgeon. "You say you do not very often lunch with Captain Ransome, and that he rang you up specially yesterday morning and asked you to lunch with him at short notice; and then you say that you discussed nothing in particular?"

"I imagine he asked me to lunch with him," answered Pamela, "because he liked my company. It's not unusual. . . ."

"He is fond of you?"

"Well, I daresay he liked me."

"I suggest," said Widgeon, "that he was in love with you, and. . . ."

Pamela half rose from her chair and interrupting him, exclaimed—"I don't know in the least what you're driving at, but I tell you this, that I'm *perfectly certain* that Jack had nothing whatever to do with Mr. Vining's death. I'm as sure of that as I am of anything."

"Why are you so certain?"

"Because I know Jack Ransome better than anybody in the world. He would be incapable of doing such a thing."

"I am very glad to hear you say that," said the detective solemnly. He put down the black ruler and leant back in his chair.

"One other question, Miss Jackson, and then I think I've done. You knew, did you not, that Captain Ransome was not well off?"

"Yes, I did, though I don't see. . . ."

"Thank you very much. I don't think I need trouble

you any more just now at any rate. You're quite sure that you've told me everything you know ? ”

“ Yes, I think I have.”

“ Oh, by the way,” said Widgeon, “ I suppose you don't happen to know where Captain Ransome is just now ? ”

The question was asked in a most casual manner considering its importance.

‘ No, I'm afraid I don't,’ answered Pamela, rather stiffly.

“ Just so,” replied the detective, as if he had thought the question hardly worth asking. “ Well, I'll not keep you any longer. Thank you very much for coming to see me. The doctor and I are going to have a little chat together,” he added as Pamela rose to go.

“ Well,” said Widgeon, after Pamela had gone, and he was left alone with Dr. Willing. “ I'm disappointed in Miss Pamela. She might have helped me a lot more than she did.”

“ In what way ? ’ asked Willing.

“ I happen to have had some reports in this morning, which are pretty reliable, and what Miss Pamela says doesn't seem to confirm them.”

“ Perhaps the reports are untrue.”

“ I think not,” replied Widgeon rather portentously.

“ Anyway, Miss Jackson seemed quite certain that Jack Ransome was innocent. Do you believe him to be guilty ? ”

“ I don't believe anything. But consider the facts. Captain Ransome was on bad terms with his uncle. You admit that yourself. He was in love with Miss Jackson,

and wanted to marry her, and his uncle disapproved—you've told me that much yourself."

The doctor nodded.

"Now, we'll assume, for the sake of argument," went on Widgeon, "that the uncle says to the nephew: 'I don't approve of your marrying so-and-so: and if you persist in the idea, I'll cut you off.' After all it's a common enough thing for a parent or person *in loco* to say. The nephew, being a young fellow of some spirit says—to himself—that he'll see his uncle in hell first, and promptly asks the girl to marry him. She, being a young lady of sense, and knowing him to be penniless—also no doubt knowing the mind of the uncle on the subject since she's his secretary—refuses. They have a row and the young man goes off in a temper, with God knows what thoughts in his mind against his uncle—the man who is successfully standing between him and his girl. The uncle is mysteriously murdered the same afternoon, and the young man disappears. I've put the facts very crudely, but you can dot the i's and cross the t's. What have you got to say to that?"

"What evidence have you that Jack and Pamela had a row? She seemed to maintain that nothing out of the ordinary had occurred."

"Precisely," replied Widgeon. "She wasn't going to admit they had a row. Think how damaging that would be for him—the man she wants to protect!"

"But what evidence *have* you then of this alleged row?"

"None direct. But I know from a friend of his at the hospital, who met him as he was going out yesterday

afternoon, that, 'Ransome seemed in a devil of a state' and said he was going to do 'something damned silly'."

§ II

Dr. Willing's breath was almost taken away by the detective's theory.

"That's all very well, Inspector, as a *theory*," he protested, "although I could pick a good many holes in it."

"Pick one," suggested Widgeon.

"Well, to take a small point. You make Miss Jackson out to be rather a mercenary young lady: she refuses Jack because he hasn't any money. Suppose she didn't refuse him, and they *didn't* have a row, what then?"

"Well, even in that event they still wanted money, didn't they?" retorted Widgeon. "Why, for all I know, Miss Pamela may have egged him on to do the thing!"

"Good heavens." exclaimed the doctor. "Do you really imagine. . . ."

"We have opportunities of imagining all sorts of things here, as you'd very soon learn, if you worked with us, Doctor," answered Widgeon. "But, as a matter of fact, we find it best in the long run to imagine nothing at all until we're quite sure, and then, of course, there's no necessity to imagine. I suppose that's why people sometimes say that Scotland Yard officials have no imagination. Imagining things is a waste of time --anyway for us. We leave it to the poets. I admit of course that there are many

holes that could be picked in the theory I have just put forward. But without wasting time over the small ones, there's one big obvious one. And that is, assuming the facts as I have stated them to be true, is there any evidence whatever to show that Captain Ransome was anywhere near the spot when the murder was committed? If there isn't, we must regard him as above suspicion for the present at any rate, mustn't we?"

"I should hope so, too," replied the doctor. "By the way, I meant to ask you, did you find any finger-prints on the dagger?"

"None whatever," answered Widgeon.

"It doesn't look like suicide then."

"It never did, if I may say so, doctor.

At that moment the telephone bell rang. Widgeon picked up the receiver, and listened. "Right," he said. "Show him up. . . . Now I think," he added turning to the doctor, "we may possibly see something interesting."

The door opened and a man in the uniform of a tube official was shewn in, and motioned by Widgeon into the chair by the side of his desk.

"Your name's Fred Beacham, I think?" began Widgeon.

"Yes, sir."

"You were on duty on the top landing when Mr. Vining entered the lift in which he was killed?"

"Yes, sir."

"You've nothing to add to the evidence you gave me yesterday?"

"No, sir."

The detective took up his favourite black ruler,

"Do you often interview lady friends, while you're on duty?" he asked.

The man looked up in some astonishment.

"No, sir. What's the game?" he asked.

"You don't remember, for instance, talking to a lady yesterday. . . ?"

"No, sir. I don't."

"Yesterday morning, for example?"

"No, sir. . . ."

"About 12.30? Think before you answer!" added Widgeon, in a voice that cut like a knife.

The man thought.

"Why yes, sir. I *do* remember passin' a word or two, friendly like, with a young lady of my acquaintance."

Widgeon lent back in the chair, and drew a long breath.

"A pity you can't think more rapidly. It would save a lot of time in the end, you know. Well now, who was your lady friend?"

"Well, sir, she's a friend o' mine, and what we talked about 'ad no bears' on anything that happened later in the day."

"Who was she?" again asked the detective.

"Well, sir, I don't see as how it matters much what."

"Don't waste my time!" snapped Widgeon. "Who was this girl? Out with it!"

But the detective had mistaken his man. Fred Beacham was not one to be bullied. He folded his arms, and looked Widgeon full in the face.

"And what if I refuse to tell you!" he said quietly.

Widgeon changed his tactics.

"Now look here, Beacham," he said in a conciliatory tone, "we don't need to get heated over this business. What you tell me within the four walls of this room won't go any further than is absolutely necessary in the interests of justice. You needn't mind the doctor here. He's acting with me in this business. If, as you say, your talk with this young lady had nothing to do with subsequent events—and I can see that you're a truthful sort of a chap—well then no harm's done and nobody will be any the wiser. Only I must know who she is, for reasons which perhaps you don't understand."

Beacham was obviously shaken by the detective's flattery, but still he said nothing.

"I don't want to press you at all," went on Widgeon, knowing that the phrase he used was calculated to press the man more than anything else he could have said. "I simply want you to take me into your confidence, as I have taken you into mine. Confidence for confidence. I trust you, and you trust me. . . ."

"Well . . . I dunno . . . I'm sure . . ." stammered Beacham.

"Come, let me help you," said Widgeon. "She was a fairly young girl wasn't she? Younger than you are for instance?"

"Yes," replied Beacham, comforting himself with the vagueness of the admission.

"And pretty?"

"Yes," nodded Beacham.

There was a slight pause, as the detective looked intently at his man and asked:

"Was it by any chance—Grace Unthorne?"

"Blimey!" exclaimed Beacham, turning quite pale, "I didn't tell him, did I?" he looked appealingly at Dr. Willing.

"No, you didn't tell me," answered Widgeon. "I wish you had. But you can make up for it, by telling me what you talked about."

"Well, me and 'er we're friendly like, and as she was passing near by the station, she stopped to 'ave a few words. That's all. We weren't no more than two minutes together."

"Does she often pass by your station?"

"No: not often."

"Well," continued Widgeon, "What did you talk about?"

Beacham was obviously uncomfortable. He moved restlessly about in his chair.

"I can't tell you," he said at length. "All I can say is that it 'ad nothing whatever to do with anybody, 'cept me and 'er."

"Well, I'm disappointed in you, Beacham," said Widgeon. "Perhaps you'll have more sense later in the day."

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean that I'm going to give you an opportunity of thinking things over quietly."

"I've told you all I know," protested Beacham. "What more can I tell you?"

"You can tell me what you and Grace Unthorne talked about yesterday morning."

"That's between me and 'er . . . Nothin' to do with the case."

"You refuse to tell me?"

"It's nothing to do with this 'ere case at all. . . ."

Widgeon touched an electric bell on his desk, and a policeman entered the room.

"Take this man upstairs, Harvey," said Widgeon. "I may want to see him later in the day."

"'Ere I say," began Beacham. "What's the meanin' o' this?"

"When you feel disposed to open your mouth a bit wider," observed Widgeon, "you let me know."

And the policeman gently but firmly edged Beacham out of the room.

"I say," asked Dr. Willing, as soon as he was alone with the detective. "How on earth did you know it was Grace?"

Widgeon smiled

"It was a shot in the dark," he admitted, "but not entirely in the dark. I had some information this morning: the man who keeps the bookstall at Hyde Park Tube Station says that yesterday morning he saw a girl talking to Beacham. The conversation, he says, lasted about five minutes. He happened to notice, too, that she was wearing a red hat, with a blue buckle in it."

"Well?" said the doctor. "What's the connection with Grace?"

"Didn't you notice that when we met Grace Unthorne in the hall of Mr. Vining's house last night she was dressed ready for going out?"

"Yes . . . but. . . ."

"She was wearing a red hat, with a blue buckle in it," remarked Widgeon dryly. "I've got to go out now," he went on in the same tone, "I shall be back in about an hour, if you care to look back again."

§ III

It was about twelve o'clock when Inspector Widgeon left Scotland Yard, after his interview with Beacham. He entered a private car that was waiting for him in the courtyard, and was driven to 48a Sloane Street, the house of Colonel Robinson. He had called the night before, after leaving Vining's house in Hampstead, but the Colonel was away for the night and was expected back about midday on the Wednesday.

On arrival he ascertained from the maid that the Colonel was still away, but was expected back every minute. The detective decided to wait. He dismissed his car and was shown into the Colonel's study on the first floor. It was a small room, a typical "den." There were a few photographs hung on the walls—mostly military groups; and one or two photo-portraits of soldiers in uniform on the mantelpiece. On the writing desk there was a large silver-framed photograph of a beautiful woman—got up in the 'evening dress of some thirty years back. "A fine figure of a woman" thought Widgeon. "Wonder what part *she's* played in the Colonel's career." The walls were, for the most part hung with ancient swords, daggers, curious

knives, pistols, out-of-date rifles, and some wicker and metal shields. There was also a very respectable assortment of books, more perhaps than one would have expected to find in the room of "a simple soldier." A good many of them were books dealing with military subjects: there were quite a few too on comparative religion, Eastern cults and practices, and Orientalism generally. There was also a scattering of modern sensational novels, detective stories, thrillers and the like. For this latter class—especially for the detective yarns—Widgeon had a supreme contempt. "There's enough crime as it is in real life, without writing about it," he always used to say. "Besides, these story-writers never know what they're writing about, specially when they come to deal with Scotland Yard. Always make us out to be a lot of fools. . . ." He turned from the books and contemplated the lady on the desk once more. Then his eye wandered over the other objects on the desk, the brass ink-stand, two curiously worked candlesticks, an engagement calendar with some entries written in, and finally the open blotting-pad. As he looked at this blotting-pad his gaze suddenly became intense. He picked up a magnifying-glass that was on the desk and held it over the blotter. Then he gave a low whistle, and at the same moment he heard the front door of the house open and close and someone coming upstairs.

The study door opened and a tall and rather aristocratic looking man came in. His age must have been between fifty and fifty-five: his hair was grey about the temples and his features were finely modelled. His expression was pleasant, but the deep lines that seamed his face bore

witness to a life of action, and perhaps suffering. He was extremely well-dressed. He came forward with a questioning look.

"Colonel Robinson?" asked Widgeon.

"Yes, I am Colonel Robinson," answered the man.

"I am Detective-Inspector Widgeon of Scotland Yard."

The man showed some faint surprise and motioned his visitor to sit down.

"I am in charge of the investigations," continued Widgeon, "in connection with Mr. Vining's death. I think you knew Mr. Vining?"

"Yes, I knew him," answered the Colonel.

"You saw him as recently as last Monday at his house in Hampstead, I think?"

The Colonel nodded an affirmative.

"Would you mind telling me the nature of your interview with him?"

"Certainly," replied Colonel Robinson. "I know his nephew, young Jack Ransome, quite well, and I heard that Vining was thinking of cutting off his allowance, or doing something equally drastic. Now Jack's quite a good, deservin' sort of a fellow: so I thought I'd tackle Vining on the subject."

"And what did Mr. Vining say?"

"Well, I'm afraid he took it in rather bad part. Said it wasn't my business."

"And then?"

"Then, I just came away."

"Did you leave Mr. Vining in a bad temper?" asked Widgeon.

"I should think I probably did, yes."

"Can you remember what his last words to you were?"

The Colonel thought for a moment.

"No, I don't think I can," he answered at length. "I don't expect they were very polite."

"You didn't . . . threaten him at all?"

"Good God, no! Why do you ask?"

"You just came away, having failed in your mission?"

"That's about it."

"You weren't contemplating doing anything further in the matter?"

"What could I do?" asked the Colonel.

"That's what I'm asking you, sir," replied the detective.

"Well, I might have had another interview with him later on—or I might have written to him. But in any case I don't suppose it would have been any good."

"He was determined to cut the young man off, then?"

"He seemed so."

"Do you know why he seemed so determined?"

"I think it was something to do with Jack wanting to get married. But I'm not very certain. That was one of the things I wanted to discuss with Vining. But I wasn't able to."

"I see," said Widgeon and then after a slight pause, "How is it that you came to take such an interest in Captain Ransome?"

"I knew his mother very well, years ago. She died when Jack was a baby. I naturally took an interest in her boy, and I became quite fond of him." The Colonel looked

down in some slight confusion, as an Englishman does whenever he has to speak of his affections.

"Do you see him often?"

"No," answered the Colonel, "as a matter of fact I don't see much of him these days."

"Do you know where he is now?"

"No idea."

There was a pause.

"How did you know that his uncle was thinking of cutting him off?"

"Well, I've known for some time that Jack and his uncle weren't on the best of terms. I always considered Vining a difficult man, you know. I don't know if you ever met him, Inspector?"

"Yes, I met him several times," said Widgeon, at the same time sniffing a red-herring. "But you were telling me," continued Widgeon, "how exactly you came to hear that his uncle was going to cut him off."

The Colonel hesitated a moment, and rubbed his nose.

"Jack mentioned it to me himself," he said.

"When?"

"Oh, I can't exactly remember when. Some time last week, I think."

"Have you seen Captain Ransome since your interview with Mr. Vining on Monday?"

"No."

"Are you in communication with the other people in Mr. Vining's household besides Mr. Vining himself?"

"I'm not on the telephone here, if that's what you mean. I hate the telephone."

"But you know the other people in the house?"

"I know old Mrs. Bateman. She used to be Jack's nurse when he was a baby. Rather voluble," the Colonel smiled, "but a heart of gold."

"Do you know anyone else in the house?"

"Well, I don't *know* them exactly. I know *of* them, of course. There's a parlourmaid, isn't there? And a Malayan servant . . . I forget his name." The Colonel paused.

"And yet you wrote it quite recently, Colonel," said Widgeon simply.

Colonel Robinson changed colour.

"How do you . . . What do you mean?" he stammered.

"By the way," asked Widgeon casually, "who fills in your engagement calendar for you?"

"I do, of course," said Robinson shortly. "Who else would?"

The detective then went over to the writing table and brought the blotting-pad to where the Colonel was sitting. "What do you make of that?" asked Widgeon.

On the blotting-paper, which was fairly new and clean, there was quite clearly traceable the name Suleiman, appearing, of course, in reversed characters as through a looking-glass. Colonel Robinson looked at it.

"That's not my writing," he said quickly.

"It's extraordinarily like the writing on the engagement calendar, Colonel," observed Widgeon dryly.

The Colonel looked at it again, and thought for a moment.

"Why yes, of course," he said with a smile, "I remember now. I wanted Suleiman to come and see me about something or other to do with the customs and habits of Malays—I'm rather interested in Eastern folklore, you know."

"Quite," replied Widgeon, frigidly—that is to say, as far as a monosyllable allows one to be frigid.

"And as I thought he might have some difficulty in finding the address, I wrote it down for him and addressed the envelope to him. 48a is rather difficult to find, unless you know your way about, you know."

"Quite," said Widgeon again.

"Well, that's why you see Suleiman on the blotting-paper. I just blotted the envelope."

"But where's the address? I don't see the address on the blotting-paper," remarked Widgeon.

"No—because I didn't address it. I gave it to . . . to . . ." the Colonel hesitated.

"Yes?" said the detective encouragingly, "who did you give it to?"

"A servant girl from Vining's house came down to see me about something, and as she was going back there, I gave it to her and told her to give it to Suleiman."

"Who was this girl?"

"I've said It was one of Vining's servants."

"He's only got one servant girl"

"Well, this must have been the one, then."

"When was this?"

"Yesterday."

"What time?"

The Colonel's head began to swim with so many questions. He didn't answer.

"What time?" persisted the detective.

"Oh, about midday, I should think: perhaps just after. Say between twelve and a quarter past."

Believe nothing that you hear and only half that you see, thought Widgeon; excellent rule that.

"You say that Mr. Vining's servant came to see you about something. What did she come to see you about, Colonel?"

"She came to deliver a note to me."

"What about?"

"About a purely private matter, Inspector," replied the Colonel not without irritation. "Really I don't know why I should be answering all these questions. They've got nothing whatever to do with Mr. Vining's death - about which I know absolutely nothing."

"Of course not," agreed Widgeon quickly. "But I naturally want all the help you can give me. You can at least tell me who this note came from?"

"It came from Mrs. Bateman," said the Colonel. "She's a very old acquaintance of mine and as she's been more or less a mother to Jack ever since he was a baby, she was naturally worried at the turn things were taking between him and his uncle. She therefore wrote a short note to me, asking if I could use my influence with Mr. Vining, to bring about a better relation. There you have the whole of the wicked business."

"But why didn't Mrs. Bateman post this note to you, instead of sending it down by hand?" asked Widgeon.

"I don't know. You'd better ask her. I assume she was worried, and when people are worried they become impatient, Inspector. It's very natural."

"And what was your answer to Mrs. Bateman?"

"I didn't send any answer. I wanted to think things out a bit."

"And in the meantime you sent word to Suleiman to come and see you?"

"That was about something quite different."

"Oh yes," said Widgeon hastily, "that was about Eastern folk-lore, wasn't it?"

The Colonel mumbled something that might have been taken as an affirmative.

"When did he come?" asked Widgeon.

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Quick response to your summons, Colonel," said Widgeon pleasantly. "You no doubt wanted the information urgently."

"I suppose he had to choose his time," replied the Colonel equally pleasantly, "and it so happened that he was free to come yesterday afternoon. He might not have been free to come till to-day, for all I know."

"Quite," said Widgeon.

The Colonel hated the way this man said "Quite."

"And so he came yesterday afternoon?" continued Widgeon. "What time would *that* be?"

"Soon after lunch. About half-past two, I should think."

"How long was he with you?"

"About half an hour—perhaps a little longer."

"And you discussed Eastern folk-lore?"

"We did."

There was a slight pause and then Widgeon rose to go. The Colonel was distinctly relieved.

"Let me know, Inspector," he said, rather airily, "let me know if there's any more information I can give you, won't you?"

"Thank you very much, Colonel," replied Widgeon on the threshold "I most certainly will."

On leaving 48a Sloane Street Widgeon went quickly to the nearest public telephone office and put two calls through, one to the Hampstead Police Station, and the other to Scotland Yard. He then took a taxi and drove back to the Yard.

§ IV

When Widgeon reached his room at the Yard he found Dr Willing waiting for him. The account which the detective gave of his interview with Colonel Robinson seemed to surprise and interest the doctor a good deal.

"These chaps who dabble in Orientalism—" observed Willing, "You never know what they're up to"

Widgeon made no comment, but tore open an envelope that was waiting for him on his desk. Then he rang the electric bell. A policeman entered.

"I'll see this girl now, Harvey," said Widgeon.

A moment later a well-powdered and rather flashily-dressed young lady was shown in. Widgeon motioned her into the chair beside his desk.

"You are the girl that looks after the tobacco stall at Hyde Park Tube Station," said Widgeon, "is that right?"

"Yes, tha's righ'," answered the young lady.

"And what have you got to tell us?"

"Well, I read all about the Vinin' murder in the *Mirror* this mornin'. And I got thinkin' about it and glad I wasn't mixed up in it—though I seemed to be sittin' right in the middle of it as yer might say. Then I saw in the paper, where it give the details of his private life and all that, that he'd got a nigger for his servant. Struck me as so funny, y'know, to 'ave a nigger for a servant. And then I got thinkin' about it some more, and then it come over me all of a sudden like, that when I was sittin' in me stall yesterday afternoon—there weren't many people about, y'know—I 'appened to look up from the book I was readin', when I saw a nigger pass by the stall. Leastways, he looked like one of them easterners y'know. He'd got a white bandage round his head, and his trousers was white and he got a sort of blue jumper on, I could tell he was an easterner. And I thought to meself how funny to see a man like that walkin' 'bout the streets. Leastways, he wasn't exactly walkin'. I was runnin'. So funny, y'know, that I should see him like that."

"Which way was he running?" asked Widgeon.

"Well, he ran right past my stall into the station—leastways, it ain't the proper entrance. It's really where all the people come out. And so I watched 'im, and he did a bunk into the telephone box. So funny, y'know, that I should have seen him!"

"Did you see him come out again?"

"Well, no. I didn't exactly see him come out. 'Course he must have come out. But then I wasn't watchin'. I saw him go into the telephones, and then he stayed there. And then I went on reading me book, and then I forgot all about him, as you might say. Course he *must* have come out. But then, o' course, I didn't have no idea that anything was wrong, or that he might have anything to do with this 'ere murder. 'Course, in that case, I should have watched him as a cat watches a mouse, as you might say."

'There was a pause.

"And then," continued the girl, "seeing this in the paper about poor Mr. Vining having a nigger for his servant, it suddenly struck me that this might be *im*—the nigger, I mean. But o' course then again he might *not*. But, in any case, I thought I'd better tell the p'leece about it. 'Cos, y'know, y'never know, do y'? But I hope I done right."

"Quite right, Miss . . . ?"

"Miss Primrose's my name. Florrie Primrose."

"You did quite right in coming to us, Miss Primrose," said Widgeon in his gravest manner. "I wonder if you could help us still more by telling us what time you saw this nig—this easterner run into the telephone box?"

"Well, that's very curious now, 'cos I *did* happen to look at me watch, just before I went on reading me book—after I'd seen 'im I mean. Course I didn't look at me watch o' purpose. I just happened to, y'know. It was just about half-past-three."

"I see," said Widgeon calmly, in spite of the excitement which such a piece of evidence must have given him. "And the man appeared to be in a hurry, did he?"

"Yes," said Florrie nodding, "'e was running, and looking be'ind him all the same time, as you might say. Just as if 'e was trying to run away from somebody, and 'e didn't want to be seen."

"And you didn't actually see whether he used the telephone or not?"

"No, I didn't notice. Y'see I didn't think to watch 'im as close as all that."

"And you're sure you didn't see him come out?"

"No, I didn't actually see him come out. Put o' course 'e *must* have come out. Only I wasn't watching, like."

"Well, I am very obliged to you, Miss Primrose," said Widgeon getting up and shaking hands with her, "for the information which you've given us. I'll just take a note of your name and address, in case we want to call upon you again, you know."

"I hope I done right?" asked the girl, as she was leaving.

"Quite right, *quite* right," nodded Widgeon.

He returned to his desk and sat facing Dr. Willing.

"What a *very* astonishing thing!" observed the doctor. "There seems to have been quite a plot to get rid of poor old Vining. I wonder what on earth can have been behind it all? Who do you think's behind it?"

"That's what we've got to find out, Doctor," answered the inspector dryly. "I propose that we now get a quick

bite of lunch and then we'll go and have another round with Mrs. Bateman, eh ? ”

Before leaving the building Widgeon ascertained from Beccles, his chief assistant in the case, that no telephone call had been put through to Vining's house since he—Widgeon—had rung up the Yard after his interview with Colonel Robinson.

§ v

After a hasty sandwich each (and in the case of the detective-inspector a glass of beer), the two sleuth-hounds again drove up to Vining's house in Hampstead. Although they had been on the trail less than twenty-four hours, they were getting quite used to working together : or rather the inspector, who appeared to be the only one who was doing any real work, was getting used to having the doctor as a kind of “unofficial collaborator” —playing the Watson, as it were, to his own Holmes. No doubt these “unofficial collaborations” were not in accordance with the usual practice at the Yard, but after all, as Widgeon put it to himself, it did no harm to have the doctor working with him (for he would not dream of letting him into any secrets that were better kept from him), and it might do some good—for Dr. Willing was the trusted friend of the late Mr. Vining and might save—indeed had already saved—a great deal of the detective's time by supplying information—about Vining's friends, servants, etc.—that otherwise might be hard to come by.

And what was more, the doctor seemed a very modest, retiring man, not the sort at all who wanted any personal kudos over the case. From the doctor's point of view, the collaboration was equally desirable. He naturally appreciated taking a leading part in, or at any rate being in the van of, the investigations. Indeed the results that Widgeon's enquiries had already revealed, interested and even excited him beyond measure.

As the car drew up in front of Vining's house, the doctor saw Widgeon exchange a few words with a man who appeared to be loafing about on the pavement outside the house. After a moment, their conversation was over, and Widgeon and the doctor walked up the small garden-path to the front door, leaving the car (in charge of a police chauffeur) and the "loafer" outside. They were admitted by Mrs. Bateman, who at Widgeon's request came with the two men into Vining's study.

"I've sent Grace off to do the shopping," began the housekeeper as soon as they were in the room, "she's been lookin' that worried, I can't think what's got hold of the girl. I'm sure it can't be all on Mr. Vining's account, 'cos she 'asn't been 'ere long and she wasn't attached to him pertic'lar, in fact quite the reverse."

"You mean," cut in Widgeon as Mrs. Bateman paused to draw breath, "that she didn't like Mr. Vining?"

"I mean," replied the housekeeper, "that she wasn't attached to him pertic'lar. It weren't for her to like or dislike Mr. Vining: that weren't her place. But o' course Mr. Vining was a funny gentleman in many ways. He was fussy over his books and papers and such-like, and

he didn't like having Grace upset 'is things when she was doing her dustin'. Who does ? That's what I say. And o' course 'e spoke to her about it once or twice, with the sharp side of 'is tongue —and 'e *could* be sharp, if 'e wanted to, as you very well know. And o' course the girl didn't like it. What girl would ? That's where it is, they don't understand . . .”

“ What sort of girl do you find Grace ? ” asked Widgeon quickly. “ Is she quick-tempered ? Impulsive ? ”

“ Well, I wouldn't say she was quick-tempered. She'd nurse a grievance, she would, 'stead of gettin' it off her chest. If a thing rankles, get it out of your system, that's what I say. But she isn't like that. She'd 'ardly speak about anything that troubled her. She wouldn't forget it, mind you, but she'd be secretive about it. Now, if there's one sort of person I can't stand, it's your secretive sort, the sort that doesn't talk. I believe in talking.”

“ Can you remember any particular occasion when Mr. Vining gave her, as you say, the sharp side of his tongue ? I mean, had he ever at any time any special reason for being annoyed with her ? ”

“ No, it was chronic as you might say, though I never shall forget the day he left the cupboard open there”: here Mrs. Bateman indicated a small corner cupboard, with a thick leaded glass door, the glass being of a deep yellowish colour, almost opaque. “ He always keeps it locked, you see, and he only opens it on very special occasions, when he wants to show a friend the things he's got inside it. But it was a very rare thing for him to do. I suppose he must have left it open by mistake one

night, for the next morning he happened to be down rather earlier than usual, and o' course he finds the girl dustin' inside his precious cupboard. My word ! Didn't the dust fly ! Temper ! Why I thought I should have to give notice—me that's been with 'im nigh on thirty years. Why 'e even had me in 'ere, and gives me a lecture 'e did. And o' course Grace, poor girl, was very upset—naturally too. But then it blew over, though she don't forget it, mind ! Once get on the wrong side of that girl and she'll not forgive you."

"How long ago did this happen ?" asked Widgeon.

"That'd be about four or five months ago now, I should think," replied Mrs. Bateman. "Soon after Grace first come 'ere."

"Now, tell me, Mrs. Bateman," went on Widgeon, "you've been with Mr. Vining nearly thirty years, you say. How did you first come into his service ?"

"Well, you see, it was this way," began Mrs. Bateman, delighted with the opportunity of recounting some of her personal history. "We lived down in the country, in a little cottage, on one of them large estates. There was me and my father and mother and my brother Jim, who went off for a soldier. I was just eighteen at the time and helpin' mother : we used to do washing for the Hall and quite a few other gentry round there. And one day, the young Squire, he comes to mother and says that a friend of his is looking about for a nice girl who'll take charge of a baby, whose mother and father 'ad died. My mother looked at 'im knowing-like, and thinking in 'er mind that she'd 'eard before about them orphan babies.

But the young Squire he laughed, quite frank and hearty, and said he was sure there was nothing of that kind about this baby, 'cos 'is friend was a very respectable gentleman and one who wasn't given to that kind of thing. My mother, she said that she'd 'eard of even the *most* respectable gentlemen getting theirselves into trouble. 'Owver that may have been, the young Squire 'e said 'e'd take good care that there was no 'anky-panky with any girl from our village. Course 'e saw how much I wanted the job and 'e didn't want my mother to stand in the way without good reason. 'Cos, you see, I was dead set on going. I'd never so much as been up to London before in all my life. It was a kind of fairyland to me, where princes and princesses . . ."

"In short you got the job?" cut in Widgeon.

"Well, my mother gave way in the end, and I was sent up to London straight away. I was met by a young gentleman at the station and we 'ad tea together. I shall never forget that tea—the idea of getting tea at all at a railway station . . ."

"And after tea?" said Widgeon, anxious to keep her on the rails.

"Well, after tea he brought me straight up 'ere to this very 'ouse, and I was introduced to Mr. Vining, and I saw the baby—as sweet a baby as you could imagine: course I fell in love, as you might say, with it at once. I can remember as well as anything the look it gave me. . . ."

"Yes, and after that?" prompted Widgeon.

"Well, I was just goin' to tell you," observed Mrs.

Bateman, drawing herself up. "They 'ad an old Indian nurse looking after the baby—what they called an 'ire.' It seems that they'd just come back from India, and o' course they didn't want the baby to grow up with Indian ideas like, so they got rid of the 'ire' and they took me on. And 'ere I've been ever since."

"And what about the other gentleman, the one that met you at the station? What became of him?" asked Widgeon.

"Well, at first 'e took a great deal of interest in the boy; and then 'e seemed to drop out, as you might say. To tell you the truth, 'e and Mr. Vining didn't 'it it off together, as you might say. They had a row very early on—I'm speaking o' twenty-five years ago or more now—and then the other gentleman didn't come to the 'ouse no more. But 'e used to send me a line regular, to ask how Mr. Jack was getting on. I expect 'e was afraid of Mr. Vining's temperament, you know: though I will say that Mr. Vining 'as always treated 'im proper—I mean Mr. Jack—leastways up to just lately. Not lavished things on the boy, you know: but then I never did believe in lavishung. Strict, 'e's been too: but then I've never minded anyone bein' strict. I'm strict myself, come to that. Course, just lately things 'ave been a bit different; but then anyone who's 'ad as much to do with Mr. Vining as I 'ave, knows well enough that 'e's what you might call a *difficult* man. Uneven and moody, you know. Sometimes I've found it 'ard to understand 'im myself. But there, we all 'ave our little ways, don't we?"

"But still you found it necessary to call in the 'other

gentleman', eh, Mrs. Bateman?" observed Widgeon with a smile.

"Lor', you *are* a one, I declare," exclaimed Mrs. Bateman. "It wasn't *my* intention, I'm sure, to give away any names. It's not my business, nor never 'as been, and I'm not the one to go poking my nose into other people's pies. But I *can* tell you this, Colonel Robinson's been a good friend to me, just as he has been to Mr. Jack, and whatever you may say about him, you can't say he's not a *real* gentleman. On that I'll take my *dying* oath, so I will!"

"I'm sure he has, Mrs. Bateman," replied Widgeon. "I don't doubt it for a moment. But do you know of any reason why he should be so very much interested in Captain Ransome?"

"Well no, I can't say as I do," answered Mrs. Bateman. "The same thing's struck me, more than once. But it's none of my business."

"When the trouble came, why did you go to Colonel Robinson rather than to Mr. Vining?"

"Well, it was Mr. Vining himself what was making the trouble," retorted Mrs. Bateman.

"But isn't that rather going behind Mr. Vining's back?" persisted Widgeon.

"Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. But the Colonel he says to me—long before this mess-up, mind you—'e says, Mrs. Bateman 'e says—for that matter 'e said it long before I married poor Bateman, when 'e used to call me Miss Shoesmith—now I've forgotten what . . ."

"You were telling us what the Colonel said to you."

"Oh, yes. The Colonel 'e says to me, Miss Shoemith 'e says, if ever Jack's in trouble you be sure and come to me."

"He said that, did he?" observed Widgeon.

"Yes, 'e said that," continued the housekeeper, "well-knowin' Mr. Vining's temperament: that's what it really was; it was Mr. Vining's temperament wot was behind it all, as you might say."

"Did you ever hear anything of Captain Ransome's parents?" asked Widgeon.

"'Is mother must 'a been a very sweet woman," replied Mrs. Bateman. "She died in bearing him, poor dear, at least so I've 'eard 'Is father was murdered, they say, just before 'e was born. It was partly the shock of it, I dare say, that killed 'is dear mother. I wouldn't go to India, not for anything, I wouldn't. They think nothing of murderin' people in them parts, I'm sure."

"Tell me, Mrs. Bateman," said Widgeon, "what was it made you send a note to Colonel Robinson yesterday morning? What actually occurred?"

"Well," replied Mrs. Bateman, sinking into a confidential tone "it was like this 'ere. I knew there was trouble in the air between Mr. Jack and Mr. Vining. Mr. Jack used to come up and see me sometimes when he knew his uncle was out. And o' course I knew about how he failed in his exanunation, and how mad Mr. Vining was with him. And then there was the business about reducing his allowance, I knew about *that*. That was why I sent word to the Colonel in the first instance. Then yesterday morning, Mr. Jack telephoned up to speak to Miss

Jackson : she didn't happen to be here, but I spoke to him, and he told me it was all up—those were the words he used—' It's all up, Nan,' 'e says—he always calls me Nan—and I guessed it must be pretty bad, else he wouldn't have said that, and o' course I knew that he'd got a letter that morning from his uncle—for I saw it lying ready for post in the 'all on the Monday. So then I thought I'd just send round again to the Colonel— which I did ”

“ What was the urgency ? Couldn't you have posted the letter ? ” asked Widgeon

“ Well, I suppose I could,” Mrs Bateman hesitated

“ Then, why didn't you ? ”

“ I thought the Colonel would like to know as quick as possible ”

“ Well,” went on Widgeon, “ and what message did the Colonel send you in return ? ”

“ There weren't no message, properly speaking. He just told me not to worry ” There was a pause

“ Well, I'm very much obliged to you,” said Widgeon, at length, “ for what you've told us. Perhaps you'd be good enough to ask Grace to come in here. I think I heard her come back just now. I'd like to have another talk with her ”

Mrs. Bateman sulked out of the room, well pleased with the interview. Whatever else they might be saying about her, they could not say that she was an unimportant person.

“ Well, what do you make of all that ? ” asked Widgeon of the doctor, as soon as Mrs Bateman had closed the door.

The doctor rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Seems a pretty queer tale to me," he murmured. "But I think she's telling the truth. I doubt if she's got the imagination to make it up. Besides, why should she?"

"It's all new to you, then?" observed Widgeon.

"The part that Colonel Robinson played is certainly new to me," replied Willing. "In fact I don't remember ever having heard of him. He seems to have kept himself pretty dark. And Vining seems to have helped him do it. I remember as well as anything Vining coming back from his world tour. I was still struggling to become a doctor at the time, and just when he was due back I developed diphtheria, and it wasn't till some time after his return that I first saw him again. He'd settled down in this house, and I remember well my amusement at finding him with a Malayan boy as a servant. 'That's not all,' he said, 'I've not only got a Malayan servant: I've got a ward to look after as well.' He was referring, of course, to the baby. He explained to me that the child's mother was a relative of his, with whom he had stayed while he was in Malay. The father, he told me, had been murdered in some mysterious way and the shock of his death had been too much for the mother, who had died in bearing him. She seems however to have had some sort of premonition of death: for before her travail she apparently extracted a promise from Vining that he would see to the child's welfare, in the event of her death. The request was perhaps an unfair one: but, in the circumstances, one which a wealthy relative could hardly refuse. And so it happened. The mother died and Vining brought the child

home and adopted it. In a very short time, the boy became his 'nephew' and he became 'Uncle Laurence.' That's the story as Vining told me; but where Colonel Robinson comes in I don't know."

"Ransome, I suppose," said Widgeon, "was the name of the child's father—the one who was murdered?"

"I presume so," replied Willing.

At this moment Grace Unthorne entered the room

"You wished to see me, sir?" she said to Widgeon

"Why, yes, I did," replied the detective and motioned her to sit down "I think you took a note down to Colonel Robinson yesterday morning, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir Mrs. Bateman asked me to take it."

"Did you deliver it to Colonel Robinson himself or did you give it to his servant?"

"I gave it to the Colonel himself."

"What did he say?"

"Well, he read the note and then told me to thank Mrs. Bateman for sending it and I was to tell her not to worry. He'd see to things."

"He said he'd see to things? Did he explain it all what he meant?"

"No, he didn't explain. He just said he'd see to things."

"I see," observed Widgeon. "And then what happened?"

"Well, then I came home."

"He gave you no other messages?" asked Widgeon slowly

"No," replied Grace.

"None of any sort?"

"No."

"Quite sure? Think before you answer!" he added quickly.

"No, no other message."

There was a pause.

"He didn't give you, for example, a note for anybody?"

The girl evidently began to realise that the detective knew a little more than she had suspected.

"Oh, yes," she replied brightly, "I do remember now. He gave me a note to give to Suleunan."

"Why can't you remember these things without my having to drag them from you?" commented Widgeon. "So he gave you a note to Sulciman, eh? Do you know what was in the note?"

"No, sir," replied Grace meekly.

"And then you came away. Did you come straight home? And for goodness sake," pleaded Widgeon, "take time to think before you answer."

"I came straight home," replied the girl without hesitation.

"Which way did you come?"

"I walked to Hyde Park Tube Station, and took the train to Hampstead. And then I walked up here."

"Did you speak to anyone at Hyde Park Tube Station?"

"No."

Grace observed that Dr. Willing was staring at the carpet and breathing hard.

"What about Fred Beacham?" suggested Widgeon.

Grace started and coloured deeply. But she said nothing.

"Well?" said Widgeon at length, "I'm waiting."

"Yes, I had a few words with him. I happen to know him."

"Why didn't you say so then?" enquired the detective.

"I didn't think it was important enough. I only just nodded to him like, as I was going into the lift."

"I've never known a nod last five minutes before," commented Widgeon.

"I wasn't five minutes with 'im!" retorted Grace quickly.

"Now, look here," said Widgeon. "I know a little more about this business than you think I do, and I don't want to have to waste any more time dragging things out of you. The best thing you can do is to make a clean breast of the whole business at once. Come on, now."

But Grace too was losing patience.

"I tell you he's just a friend a mine, and naturally as I was passing I stopped a few minutes and had a talk with him. I forget what we talked about, even. And anyway it had nothing to do with this case. That I'll swear to—in any Court of Law."

"Well, if it had nothing to do with this case, what's the difficulty about telling us?"

"I tell you, I can't remember what we talked about. Dr. Willing here knows I tell the truth," then Grace began to cry.

"Come, Grace," said Dr. Willing gently, "you mustn't cry. You haven't done anything wrong. We only want you to help us by telling us all you know. Whatever it is, you've got nothing to fear. Won't you tell us?"

"I can't—I *can't*!" sobbed the girl.

The two men glanced at one another and the doctor shrugged his shoulders and sighed.

"Well, well," said Widgeon, seeing it was useless to pursue that line of the enquiry any further at the moment. "Let's change the subject."

Grace dried her eyes and became calmer.

"Can you tell us," went on Widgeon, "where you were yesterday afternoon?"

Grace hesitated.

"It was my afternoon out," she said.

"Yes, but where did you go?"

"I went for a walk."

"Where did you walk?"

"On Hampstead Heath."

"Who with?"

"Nobody. I was alone."

"What time did you leave here?"

"Just after lunch—about two o'clock."

"And what time did you get back?"

"About half-past four."

"And were you walking all that time?"

"Ye-es."

"How many afternoons off do you have a week?"

"One."

"And you want us to believe," said Widgeon slowly, "that during your one afternoon off in the week, you spent the whole of the time walking on Hampstead Heath by yourself!"

The girl gave no reply. It was evidently as much as she

could do to prevent herself from bursting into tears again.

"You're sure," continued Widgeon, "that you didn't go to Hyde Park Tube Station again in the afternoon?"

The girl looked up, rather surprised.

"Oh, yes. I'm quite sure of *that*," she replied very frankly. It struck the detective as a truthful answer, whatever her other answers may have been.

"Thank you," he said. "That will do

Grace left the room

"There is just one other thing I want to find out," said Widgeon, "before we go any further. Do you happen to know what that cupboard contains. I mean the one in the corner with the yellow glass door?"

Dr. Willing thought for a moment, and then shook his head

"No, I do not," he replied

The detective drew from his pocket three keys on a ring

"Do you know," he asked the doctor, "which of these keys would fit the cupboard?"

The doctor again shook his head

"It wouldn't be hard to find out," the doctor added smiling, "that is, assuming that *any* of them fit."

"Of course, that is only an assumption," agreed the detective. "But seeing that he always kept the cupboard locked, and that he was very much annoyed when he found that he had left it open and that somebody was looking into it, I think it would not be unfair for us to assume that he carried the key about with him?"

The detective then went over to the cupboard, examined the keyhole before trying any of the keys and whistled softly.

"This lock had been tampered with," he announced.

The doctor came over, and looked at the lock. There were marks on the cupboard, round about the key-hole, which shewed obviously that someone had attempted to force the lock. The detective then tried the keys. Two of them were just too large to go into the key-hole. The third fitted exactly. Although the lock had been forced, the door of the cupboard had evidently been shut again and the lock had been jammed into position. It was therefore with considerable difficulty that the detective managed to turn the key in the lock, and to open the cupboard. It was a small three-cornered cupboard, without any shelves. The inside of the bottom was covered with a triangular piece of thick purple velvet. On the velvet was a small wooden block or rest, about an inch thick and about three inches long. Otherwise the cupboard was quite empty.

"You say you don't know what Mr. Vining kept here?" asked Widgeon.

"No, I don't," replied Willing.

"You remember the dagger that stabbed Mr. Vining?" Willing nodded.

"Had you ever seen it before yesterday?"

"No."

"And you've naturally seen most things in this house — most of the curios, I mean?"

"Yes."

"Well then, I shouldn't be surprised if he had kept this dagger in here, eh?"

"Quite likely, I should think," agreed the doctor.

The detective rubbed his chin and thought for a moment. He then went over to the telephone which was on Vining's desk and put a call through to Scotland Yard.

§ VI

Whether for good or for evil, most people are naturally interested in crime, and when a more or less well-known member of the community—such as Laurence Vining was—meets his death in so spectacular and at the same time mysterious a fashion as he did, the public immediately becomes thrilled and is seized—to the great advantage of newspaper proprietors—with an insatiable curiosity: it wants to know every detail—relevant and irrelevant—concerning every man, woman and child who is even in the remotest way connected with the case. Private lives all of a sudden become public property: thoughtless acts that ordinary people perform every day of their lives, are, in the case of the persons involved, clothed with an unimagined significance. Nothing is sacred, from the grief of the murdered man's mother, to the facial expression of the next-door neighbour but one of the prisoner's third cousin ("photo inset"). Newspaper posters bear words that would have no meaning whatever were it not for the fact that all the

world is thinking about the case and has the main facts at its finger ends—as well as on the tip of its tongue. Such poster-wordings as “Knife found,” “Lift haunted?” “Tobacconist sheds light” and a score of others even less illuminating than these, would be quite unintelligible were it not for the knowledge possessed by the people who read them. As it is, everybody knows what they mean, because they refer to something that everybody is thinking and talking about.

The publicity and sensation caused by the mysterious death of Laurence Vining was almost without parallel. The Tuesday evening papers were full of it, and it was already forming the subject of conversation between all sorts of people on all sorts of occasions. Mayfair hostesses, during the *mauvais quart d'heure* before dinner that evening started at once discussing the case with their guests, and the discussion, suitably adorned with theories and reminiscences of “similar occurrences back in the '80s,” etc., etc., was, as often as not, carried on right through dinner and even after that. The next morning, city-bound business men who usually spent the journey solidly ensconced behind their newspapers and never dreamt of speaking to one another, were actually drawn into an exchange of views on the “Lift Case” as it had been christened. The public sensation was a common bond between all men. It formed the subject of conversation not only in all the taverns of the Metropolis, but in every wayside public house and country inn throughout the length and breadth of the land. It had gripped the great British public and held it enthralled.

It was in such an atmosphere as this that Suleiman, the Malayan, woke on the Wednesday morning at about five o'clock. He crept out of a small wooden shed on the south side of the river just below Hungerford Bridge, where he had spent the night. He was clad, not in his picturesque attire of the previous day to wear that would have been to court the attention which he wished to avoid—but in a dark grey and rather shabby-looking suit, a white muffler round his neck and a brown felt hat with a turn-down brim. He left the river-side and went up a back alley that led into a side street that in its turn led into a main road. It was too early for many people to be about, and even the main road was fairly deserted, save for some barges going to their work and an odd loafer or so who had spent the night much as Suleiman had—in some temporary abode. He walked along the road for some distance and at length came to a coffee-stall where he ordered some hot coffee and a meat-pie. There were two other men at the stall, also having an early breakfast. They took no notice of Suleiman, who stood with his back to them.

"Been dossin' out, matev?" volunteered the man in charge of the stall to Suleiman, who nodded in reply.

"Fine mornin'," went on the man.

Suleiman nodded a second time and ordered another meat-pie.

The man in charge was leaning on the counter of his stall with his elbows on the previous night's evening paper, which was spread out in front of him.

"Funny thing, this 'ere Lift murder," he said. "Feller done in in an empty lift. Seems a bit funny to me."

A cold shiver ran down the Malayan's spine. He asked the man if he knew what the time was. It was the first question that came into his head. The man glanced back at the gun-metal watch that was hanging on the wall.

"Quarter to six," he said.

Suleiman paid for his refreshment and continued his walk along the road, which was rapidly awakening into life. Quarter to six! He ought not to have crept out of his hut as early as this: there weren't enough people about to make him inconspicuous. He longed for the streets to fill themselves, so that he could mingle with and be lost in the crowd. As it was, he felt that the curious eye of every passer-by was upon him: he even imagined that people were peering out at him from behind window-blinds and round corners. Foolish! He tried to pull himself together. He stopped to look into a shop window—it was a sweet shop and the window was filled with an unappetising array of dusty confectionery. Not the sort of stuff one wanted to gaze at for any length of time! A man who had passed while Suleiman was looking at the shop window suddenly looked back. Then he stopped and waited for Suleiman to catch him up. The Malayan was terrified. His legs carried him on mechanically: he could not have stopped or turned in the other direction if he had tried. He came to where the man was standing, and he felt his muscles tighten and his fists clench. What was going to happen? The man took no notice whatever of Suleiman: in fact his attention seemed to be directed to

something a long way behind Suleiman. The Malay passed him and he still took not the slightest notice.

Suleiman's muscles relaxed, but he dared not look round until he had got a good fifty yards from the man. Then he stopped and looked in another shop window and managed to glance round. The man had gone off the pavement and was walking slowly in the road in the other direction ! Suleiman hurried on inexpressibly relieved.

He had no very clear idea of his objective. His one purpose was to hide himself in the great city so that there should be no trace of him. Where should he turn ? His colour was against him ; if people looked once at a white man, they looked twice at a man of colour. Obviously he must get into some district where his colour would be least conspicuous—into some place where men of colour congregated and where he would be as a chameleon. He did not know this part of London very well, and he spent a considerable time wandering about in search of a possible refuge : then he thought of Dockland where the big ships from the East were berthed and where there would be other men of his race and colour. This undoubtedly would be a good place to make for. He got on to the north side of the river and walked eastwards. Everywhere he went the morning newspaper posters seemed to stare him in the face : " Tube Mystery: Man found stabbed." " Dead man found in 'Tube Lift," etc., etc. Suleiman bought a paper. He read the account of the discovery, much as it had appeared in the newspaper of the previous evening. Scotland Yard had lost no time, so the paper said, in taking up investigations, and several

important clues were being followed up. Then there came some biographical details and personal notes about the late Mr Vining.

"Mr. Vining," the paragraph ran, "was a great collector and his house in the old part of Hampstead contained many treasures from all parts of the world. One feature of it was the oriental atmosphere with which its owner surrounded himself, even to the extent of retaining a Malayan as a personal servant. Visitors at 'The Lane House' have frequently remarked on the picturesqueness and luxury . . ." etc.

In the late news column, the following note appeared :

"Lift Mystery.

Up to a late hour last night no trace could be found of Suleiman, Mr. Vining's Malayan servant."

Suleiman folded up the paper quickly and walked on. The streets were well filled by now, and he noticed that nearly everyone was carrying a newspaper. Anyone, at any moment, might see his dark skin and suspect ! He hurried on. If only he could get to the docks ! Would it be safe to take a bus ? At first he thought not. Then he noticed one with the back inside seat vacant. He hastened to where the bus had stopped and jumped on just as it was moving off. Even the conductor's helping hand gave Suleiman a shock.

Slowly the bus made its way eastwards : at times there were long waits in the traffic, and people in other buses drawn up alongside stared at the people in Suleiman's bus. He buried his face in his paper. Was he being fool-

ish, he wondered ; and unduly nervous ? But his feelings were hardly susceptible to reason. All he knew and could realise was that if anyone of the vast number of people he was mingling with should become aware of his identity, he would immediately be set upon and handed over to the authorities. This knowledge was staggering to him - more staggering than he ever thought it would or could be ; to think that the man who was sitting next to him in the bus - and who happened at the moment to be reading about the " Lift Case " might suddenly look up, and realise that the man the police were wanting was actually by his side !

The journey came to an end at last and Suleiman got out of the bus near the East India Dock Road. He crossed over and went into a large timber-yard where there were a number of men lolling about, waiting to be employed. Among them were some coloured men. Suleiman sidled unobtrusively into a corner and sat down on some planks. He remained undisturbed for some time. Presently a burly labourer strolled up to him.

" Got a fag, Jim ? " asked the labourer casually.

Suleiman got out some cigarettes from his pocket and offered the man one.

" I can't stand this heat," observed the man, after he had lighted his cigarette and had sat down next to Suleiman on the planks. Suleiman shrugged his shoulders. The man rested his elbows on his knees and looked at the ground. Then he spat very adequately and very accurately into a tin can that was lying about a yard away. He was a powerfully built man, thought Suleiman, as he

watched the beads of sweat roll down the mass of his face. Presently the man drew a newspaper from his pocket, unfolded it, and having ejected with a neat "zip" some surplus tobacco from his lips, he started to read. The paper was a mudday special and was devoted to cricket and other sporting news. For some time the man read in silence, and pulled at his cigarette. Then he turned the paper over to the front page. Suleiman took one glance at it and his blood ran cold. Right in the middle of the front page of the newspaper was a large photograph of himself. Underneath was written in large capitals—

MR VINING'S MALAYAN SERVANT WHO IS WANTED BY THE POLICE

"Ugly lookin' sort of a cove, ain't e?" remarked the burly one. "Slippery customer too, if I know anything. You come from them parts, don't yer?"

Suleiman shook his head and smiled.

"I come from Goa," he said. "I am Goan."

"Aow, that's what you are is it?" responded the man uncomprehendingly.

Suleiman nodded and the man looked up at him.

"Blimey!" he said, "you and this bloke 'ere in the photo is as like as two peas. But there," he added, yawning, "I can never tell any of yer from the other. Ye're all the same to me. All the same," he yawned again.

At that moment a friend of the burly man's mouched along.

"'Ere v'are Taffs," shouted the first man, "'ere's the

bloke that did in the feller in the lift!" he indicated Suleiman and then held up the newspaper.

The second man, who was older than the burly man, bent down and looked at the paper.

"Goot Heavence!" he exclaimed, "it iss an extraordinary likeness. I shoul't not like to be so like another man ass that, man!"

"You better go and 'ide yourself, Jim," laughed the burly one, "'fore the cops get yer!"

Suleiman stared at the ground, his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth. Out of the corner of his eye he observed that a policeman was standing at the entrance of the yard. His hands were resting on his belt and he was surveying the idle scene in the yard.

"Wot yer make of it, Taffy?" enquired the first man.

"It iss a most extraordinary case," replied the Welshman. "I should not be surprised, look you, to find this dago wass concealed in the lift shaft. I haf seen strange things myself. But I will tell you this, there is more behind this case than you think!"

He looked solemnly at his burly friend, who stared at him in return. There was a pause.

"Aow," said the first man. He opened his mouth to speak and then finding nothing to say, he shut it.

The policeman moved on. Suleiman seized his opportunity. Getting up slowly and as casually as possible, he yawned and stretched himself, then with a perfunctory nod at the other two he sloped away.

"Going to catch the cop up?" shouted the burly man. But Suleiman wandered on and out of the yard.

For anyone who has never been in a similar position, it is perhaps hard to imagine Suleiman's state of mind. To be alone without a friend is bad enough. To be in trouble without a friend is worse: but to be without a friend and to know that all men are at any rate your potential enemies—is just hell, and so Suleiman soon discovered. Since his photograph was now in all the papers, his chances of going about unrecognised were enormously diminished. And once anybody recognised him——!

He slunk down the street, with his hands in his pockets and his head bent low. Where could he turn? What place would receive him? He came to a corner, and stopped, leaning against a lamp-post.

"Pap-er! Pap-er!" shouted a newsboy almost next to him. "Hull about the murder! Wanted man, Phot-o!"

§ VII

Having telephoned from Vining's study to Scotland Yard, Inspector Widgeon sat down to wait. The doctor on the other hand, having a patient to visit, arranged to meet Widgeon again that evening at Scotland Yard, and in the meantime took his departure.

The inspector certainly had plenty to think about. Already twenty-four hours had gone by since Vining's death, but the manner of his death was not revealing itself, nor apparently was anybody else either able or willing to shed any light on the mystery. Widgeon

reviewed the facts: the first and perhaps most significant fact was that two men had disappeared, both of them, men who—directly or indirectly—might quite legitimately be regarded as suspicious characters. One of them, Captain Ransome, was nephew and heir to the dead man. He certainly had an "interest" in his uncle's death; moreover he was a man who had seen death often enough at first hand in the war, and was not therefore calculated to shrink from cold-blooded murder as much as most men would—and he had now disappeared.

At the same time it was only fair to admit that there was no sort of true or clear connecting him with the scene of the murder—if indeed it was murder (for Widgeon always retained this reservation in his mind).

The other man who had disappeared was Sukiman, about whom Widgeon knew practically nothing. He could therefore impute no motive. But with these low caste dagoes you never knew—they had long memories, and they used dark underhand methods. Like is not Sukiman had some grudge or other against his master and had nursed it up for year and years until the moment came to strike. It was a possibility. In any

event, Sukiman had been seen in suspicious circumstances very near the place of the crime. And he had disappeared.

Widgeon shook his head over Sukiman with these dagoes, you certainly never knew. All station calls had been sent out in respect of both these men, and an energetic search was being made for them at that moment. The police were busy combing out certain well-known haunts, and Widgeon had had

Suleiman's photograph reproduced in the press. So far, however, the search had met with no success.

Then there was that fellow Robinson. Widgeon had caught him out lying pretty brazenly about his connection with Suleiman; and yet there was something in the Colonel's manner that seemed fundamentally honest. Either he was straight, and had had a genuine lapse of memory: or else he was a villain of the first water—in which event he might be at the back of the whole affair.

Finally there was Grace Unthorne, who wore the red hat; Widgeon was inclined not to attach too much significance to the red hat. It was as like as not a blind: it might even be a coincidence. At the same time Widgeon wanted very much to know what her relation was with Fred Blackham, the upstairs ticket-collector at Hyde Park Station, whom he now had under lock and key at the Yard, and who apparently refused to open his mouth.

By way of summing-up, he ran over in his mind the principal questions, the answers to which might shed light on the mystery:

1. Why had Captain Ransome disappeared?
2. Why had Suleiman the Malayon disappeared?
3. What had Colonel Robinson's relations been with Vining?
4. Why did Colonel Robinson *really* want to see Suleiman on the Tuesday? (assuming the Colonel's statement that he wanted to discuss Eastern folk-lore to be untrue.)
5. What was Suleiman doing in the telephone box at Hyde Park Station on the Tuesday afternoon?

6. What was Grace Unthorne talking to Fred Beacham about on the Tuesday morning ?

The detective was already beginning to form certain theories in his own mind : to fit facts together and to draw conclusions. But his natural caution, joined to his long experience of criminal cases, had taught him how dangerous and unwise it always was to form hasty theories or to jump to conclusions, and above all to try and *force* facts into a preconceived frame-work of theories. He must just continue his patient investigations and use all the wits and common-sense with which he had been endowed.

He had not long to wait before the man he had telephoned for arrived in a car from Scotland Yard. The man was a finger-print expert and Widgeon immediately directed him to examine the corner cupboard and to take impressions of any finger-prints he might find there. He also gave him similar instructions concerning certain other objects in various parts of the house. The inspector then left, and ordered the police chauffeur to drive him to St. George's Hospital.

The doctor who had examined Vining's body when it had been brought in on the previous day, happened to be in the hospital when Widgeon called, and at the latter's request he accompanied the Inspector to the mortuary where the body still lay. Once more Widgeon went very carefully through the dead man's pockets ; he felt the lining of the coat, and searched in the ends of the trousers, where they are turned up, in the hope of finding something which he might have missed in his first

examination. But whatever he may have expected to find was not there. He then looked at the body in silence for some minutes.

"Tell me, doctor," he said at length speaking slowly. "what do you think about his hands? The fists are clenched. Did you notice any mark on them—on the knuckles for instance—that would indicate that he had been fighting with them . . . ?"

"No," replied the doctor, "there is no mark of any sort on the knuckles."

"Would there have been, if he *had* been fighting?"

The doctor hesitated.

"Not necessarily," he said "If he had hit anything very hard, there would naturally be some mark."

"If he hit a man's face, or any other part of his body, would there have been a mark?"

"It's hard to say. There might have been a slight bruise on the knuckles, if he had hit the other fellow very hard."

"That bruise on the chin," went on Widgeon, "was made *before* death?"

"Oh, yes, I'm quite clear on that point."

"How long before death would you say it was made?"

"There again it's very difficult to say. It might have been made immediately before death, or it might have been made some moments before. Certainly not more than five minutes before."

"But you say it *might* have been made *immediately* before—that is, say, ten or fifteen seconds before?"

"Yes."

"As there are no marks on the knuckles to indicate

that there was anything of a fight, a possible theory might be that Mr. Vining suddenly received a knock-out blow on the point of the chin- -and thereafter was immediately stabbed? "

" Yes, that's certainly a very possible theory," replied the doctor.

" And the clenched fists would be explained by the fact that a man suddenly receiving such a blow, would almost automatically clench his fists to defend himself, but would be knocked out before he had a chance to use them. Hence no marks on the knuckles? "

" That's about what happened, I should say," answered the doctor.

" The bruise on the chin couldn't be the result of the body falling out of the lift onto the hard stone floor? "

" No, I'm clear that the blow was made *before* death. And I'm clear too that the stab of the dagger would cause instant death. Whoever stabbed Mr. Vining, stabbed him in such a way and in such a place that death must have followed instantly."

There was another pause. Then Widgeon asked in the queer casual tone that he was in the habit of adopting when putting his most important questions :

" I suppose you're sure, doctor, Mr. Vining *did* die of a dagger wound? "

The doctor looked puzzled for a moment.

" I think it's fairly obvious, inspector," he answered.

" Yes," mused Widgeon, " it's fairly obvious, as you say." And then he added as he turned away from the

body, "But what's obvious isn't always true. . . . However, I'm much obliged to you, Doctor. Let's leave this place."

They went up into the main part of the hospital, and Widgeon asked to see Archie Ferrand, who was one of Jack Ransome's colleagues at the hospital and had been the last person to see him there on the previous day.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, Mr. Ferrand," said the inspector, when that gentleman arrived, "but I want a few words with you about Captain Ransome. I understand you saw him yesterday?"

"I did," replied Ferrand.

"What sort of a state was he in?"

"Well he was a bit excited, but then he was an excitable fellow."

"And he said something about doing a damn silly thing?"

"Ye-es, he said something like that," agreed Ferrand.

"You knew him pretty well, I suppose, Mr. Ferrand?" asked Widgeon.

"Pretty well, yes."

"What did he mean, when he said he was going to do a damn silly thing?"

"I haven't any idea . . . but. . . ."

"But what?"

There was a pause.

"Look here, Inspector," said Ferrand at length. "I said I knew Ransome pretty well. So I do, but only in an everyday sort of way. He never discussed his private affairs with me."

"But you knew, for example," suggested Widgeon, "that he didn't get on well with his uncle?"

"There was some talk of it. But I never really knew what their relation was."

"Did you ever meet a young lady named Miss Pamela Jackson?" asked the inspector.

"Yes, once or twice."

"They were in love?"

Ferrand gave a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"Perhaps. I don't know."

There was a pause.

"There's one other thing, Mr. Ferrand," said Widgeon at length. "Captain Ransome slept in the hospital, didn't he?"

Ferrand nodded.

"I'd like to see his room. Would you mind taking me up to it?"

"Not at all," answered Ferrand, and took the inspector along the main passage leading from the hall of the hospital, down a flight of stairs and through a kind of tunnel into the court-yard at the back, across the court-yard and so to the staff's living quarters. The two men then climbed two flights of stairs and at length reached the bedroom which Jack Ransome occupied. It was a small and rather bare room, with a single bed in it, a chest of drawers, a wash-hand stand, and two chairs. A suit of Jack's clothes was hanging on one of the chairs and there were a few books on the mantelpiece. The bed was made. It was a hot day, and the room seemed fuggy. The detective lifted the window to let some fresh air in. In

the distance the hum of London's traffic could be heard droning like some huge bumble-bee. Widgeon sat down on the bed.

"Not what you'd call a houdoir, eh, Inspector?" observed Ferrand

"Not exactly," agreed Widgeon

"Ransome didn't go in for trimmings—I mean he *doesn't* go in for them. I don't know why we should refer to him in the past tense, as if he were dead"

"No," returned Widgeon "But he's disappeared though"

"He frequently disappeared, Inspector. Sometimes he'd be away for two or three days without any of us knowing where he'd got to"

"Where *had* he got to, d'you suppose?"

Ferrand shrugged his shoulders

"Ransome was a devil-may-care sort of chap, up to all sorts of tricks. Shouldn't be surprised if he went down to Limehouse and spent the night in an opium den"

"Funny idea some people have," reflected Widgeon half to himself, "that Limehouse is the place where the opium dens are. But go on, Mr Ferrand. I apologise for interrupting you"

"I don't say he *did* spend nights in those places, you know, but he was quite capable of it"

"Women?" queried Widgeon laconically

"Perhaps," answered Ferrand vaguely "He didn't discuss such things with me"

There was a pause. The Inspector got up from the bed on which he had been sitting and went over to the open

window, and leant out. Below was the empty courtyard, with the sun beating down on it. To the right was the roof of the students' club. Beyond that and outside the hospital grounds was another low flat roof and then another yard in which was stored a quantity of planks and building material. It was a lazy afternoon, not at all the sort of day, thought Widgeon to himself, for investigating murder in the centre of the town. Now if only the murder had been committed, in accordance with the usual practice in all the best detective novels, in a country house ! The country ! That was the place to be on a day like this. Chasing a cricket ball -- far better sport than chasing criminals. Widgeon was a keen cricketer, and was captain of the Scotland Yard team ; fielding was his strong point. People at the Yard still remember the great Home Office match when Sergeant Widgeon -- as he was then -- playing for the Yard and fielding at cover, had flicked in the ball and spread the stumps from a distance of some ninety yards, just in time to get the Chief of the Aliens Department run out ! It had been a fluke, of course, but if anybody could have done it, Widgeon could. He had a remarkable eye and was a deadly shot with a cricket ball. He gazed down at the timber yard and just like a school-boy longed to throw something down at a flower-pot that was standing on one of the planks. But he reflected that his aim wasn't what it used to be : he was getting on now ; if he attempted to throw something down at that flower-pot he'd probably hit the window in the building just beyond the timber yard. Wasn't far though : seventy or eighty yards, perhaps, as the crow flies : down to that

window any way. The window in question was open. He gazed at it, wondering how many shots he'd take with a cricket ball to get through the open part of it, without breaking the lower pane.

Ferrand stood idly by, watching the Inspector and wondering what it would be like to be a detective. Suddenly he saw Widgeon's expression change from one of idle speculation to one of the most intense interest. His whole body seemed to stiffen and to become alert. What had the Inspector seen to awaken such interest?

"Well, I never knew *that* before!" exclaimed Widgeon suddenly.

"What's the matter Inspector?" asked Ferrand, full of curiosity.

"Look," he said pointing to the window. "You look through that window and watch!"

The two men watched. For some moments nothing happened. It was dark inside the window, and the gleaming light outside made it difficult for Ferrand to see anything very clearly. Presently, however, from behind the window two wooden sliding doors were seen to open, and then an iron gate was swung back. Shortly after that a man was seen to pass through the space left by the opening of the doors and the swinging back of the gate.

"What's happening?" asked Ferrand. "Where did that man go?"

"That man has just walked into the lift at Hyde Park Tube Station," observed Widgeon dully.

The window was in fact a window in the back corner of the wall of Hyde Park Tube Station. During the summer

months it was naturally kept open in order to air the station. It overlooked the yard where some timber was temporarily stored, not far beyond the hospital courtyard. The window itself was some ten or twelve feet from the ground; just underneath it was a pile of timber. Widgeon's gaze travelled slowly back from the pile of timber, across the yard to the flat roof, thence to a drain-pipe which ran vertically less than two feet from the wall of the hospital courtyard; in its course upward the drain-pipe passed within one foot of the window-sill on which Widgeon was leaning . . . A young active man . . . like Jack Ransome. . . ?

Widgeon returned to his seat on the bed. For some moments he remained wrapt in thought, his fingers idly drumming against the edge of the mattress on which he was sitting. Ferrand stood leaning against the mantelpiece, also wrapt in thought. Of a sudden the fingers of the inspector's right hand ceased to drum. They closed instead round a hard object. Slowly the inspector drew the object from under the mattress.

"Hullo," he murmured, "what have we here?"

He held the object up for Ferrand to see.

"What have we here?" he repeated.

Ferrand looked at it curiously.

"It would seem to be the sheath of a dagger," he observed.

§ VIII

The dagger sheath in question was made of black leather and was just about the right size for containing the dagger which was found in Vining's body.

For some moments neither of the two men spoke. Probably the same thoughts were racing through their minds. Ferrand knew Jack Ransome well enough to know that he was capable of anything, but it was at any rate some comfort for him to realise that, even if Jack had taken a hand in this mad business, the i's and t's of his complicity still remained to be dotted and crossed.

Widgeon himself was badly shaken. Up to five minutes ago he had resolved in his own mind that Jack's disappearance, however unfortunately it had been timed could be explained on other grounds. His observations out of the window had certainly suggested another train of thought, which however he was on the point of dismissing as fantastic. Then came the discovery of this dagger sheath in Ransome's room. That too could doubtless be explained . . . Widgeon was chary of jumping to conclusions.

He looked up at Ferrand, who met his gaze steadily.

"I want to see the chambermaid who does this room," said Widgeon. "How can I get hold of her?"

"I'll fetch her," volunteered Ferrand.

"No," answered Widgeon casually, "don't trouble. Why not ring that bell?" he indicated a bell by the mantelpiece. Ferrand shrugged his shoulders and rang the bell.

"They don't always answer it," he remarked.

For some moments they waited in silence: then they heard footsteps on the stairs and a knock at the door. A maid entered.

"Do you do this room out?" asked the inspector.

"Yes, sir," answered the maid.

"Did you make this bed this morning?"

"Why no, sir," replied the girl. "You see, Mr. Ransome was out last night. He didn't sleep in it."

"So that this bed hasn't been made since yesterday morning?"

"No, sir."

"Do you usually turn the mattress when you make the beds?"

"Always, sir."

"Did you see Mr. Ransome yesterday?" asked Widgeon.

The maid thought for a moment.

"I saw him in the morning: he came down rather earlier than usual."

"Did you see him in the afternoon?"

"Ye-es," replied the girl with some hesitation. "I *did* see him. Last night I saw him come in. I was downstairs at the time, and I just saw him come in at the lower entrance and go upstairs."

"Did you see him go out again?"

"No, sir. But then I wasn't watching for him particular. He might easily have slipped out without my seeing him."

"What time was it when you saw him come in?"

"Between a quarter and half-past two, sir, I should think."

"I suppose you usually looked after Mr. Ransome's clothes and such like?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you think of Mr. Ransome? Was he—nice to you?"

"Oh yes, sir. He was a perfect gentleman, Mr. Ransome was. Always quite the gentleman. We was very fond of him, us servants."

"Was he—flighty?"

"Well, he was always on for a lark, as you might say," said the maid smiling.

"I see," answered Widgeon. "Thank you very much. That's all."

"Thank you, sir."

The maid left the room.

Widgeon turned to Ferrand—"What time was it," he asked, "when you saw Ransome leave the hospital?"

"Between half-past three and a quarter to four. I can't say nearer than that."

"And he went out by the main entrance?"

"Yes," answered Ferrand.

"But nobody saw him between the time when the maid says she saw him (that is between half-past two and three—say three at latest) and the time when *you* saw him go out, say half-past three *or just after*?"

"Apparently not," assented Ferrand.

"I'm afraid there's no apparently about it," said

Widgeon quietly. "The most extensive enquiries have been made."

"Well, if he was in this room by himself, nobody would have seen him," observed Ferrand.

The inspector nodded.

"I'm going to make a bit of a search in this room," he announced. "You mustn't let me keep you if you have work to do."

"It's all right, Inspector," replied the doctor. "They know where I am and can send for me if I'm wanted. I might as well stay."

Widgeon then went through all the drawers in the chest of drawers. They contained nothing but clothing. The books on the mantelpiece were mostly medical works. There were one or two novels. The drawer in the wash-hand stand contained nothing more incriminating than an old tooth brush and two football fixture cards. Jack Ransome's trunk, under the bed, contained more clothing, a few photographs of young ladies (some of them rather obviously Parisian, and not quite so obviously ladies) and half a dozen or so of books. Jack's suitcase, which was also under the bed, was empty. A pair of pyjamas lay neatly folded on the pillow of his bed, and on top of the chest of drawers there remained his hair brushes and comb, clothes brush, etc.

"There doesn't seem to be anything else of interest here," observed Widgeon at length.

"I am glad to hear it, Inspector," said Ferrand.

"All the same, I'm going to have the room locked," went on Widgeon, "for the present at any rate."

The two men passed out of the room. Widgeon then locked the door and put the key in his pocket. On the way down he asked the maid if she had a key to the room.

"No, sir," she answered. "There's only one key that I know of, and that's in the door."

"Well, it's in my pocket as a matter of fact, missy," said Widgeon with a smile. "Good-day."

The inspector then thanked Dr. Ferrand for the assistance he had rendered, and asked him to inform the authority of the hospital that he had locked up Ransome's room and taken the key. He then left the hospital.

It was about a quarter to four, and he still had a full programme in front of him. First of all he hurried round to Hyde Park Tube Station. The lift in which Vining had been discovered was still closed to the public by his orders, and a special policeman was on duty at the station. The policeman saluted Widgeon.

"Nothing to report, sir," he said. "The liftmen here are a bit anxious about Beacham."

"Tell 'em not to worry," replied Widgeon. He then called one of the liftmen in question, and asked to be taken down in one of the lifts. "I want," he added, "to get on to the floor of the lift shaft."

The liftman thereupon procured a ladder, and took Widgeon and the policeman down in the lift which ran in the same shaft as the lift in which Vining had descended (for two lifts run in each lift shaft). When they reached the bottom, the ladder was put into position and Widgeon climbed down it on to the floor of the lift shaft. That is to say, he was immediately under the lift which

Vining had used. He was followed by the policeman. Widgeon spent some moments in carefully examining the floor and every piece of paper and refuse with which it was littered. The search, however, seemed to reveal nothing of interest or importance, and Widgeon soon abandoned it, and returned by the lift to the upper station. By his request he was taken into the booking office. The booking clerk was a tall, thin man, with a supercilious air about him. He looked, and probably was, thoroughly bored with his job. At the moment the inspector entered, he was leaning on the counter, engrossed in reading "Tess of the D'Urbervilles." The lifeman who came in with the inspector coughed slightly.

"This is the inspector from Scotland Yard, Willis," he said.

Willis looked up and eyed the inspector. He said nothing and, as it to emphasise the silence, he sucked his teeth somewhat audibly.

"Were you on duty here yesterday afternoon about 3.30?" asked Widgeon.

Willis nodded and again sucked his teeth.

"Do you remember selling a ticket to Mr Vining?"

Willis gave a shake of his head.

"Can't say."

Willis was evidently a man of few words.

"Do you mean you don't remember?"

"Can't remember everyone who buys a ticket."

"Did you know Mr. Vining by sight?"

Willis shook his head. He seemed too bored to say "no."

"Do you remember selling a ticket to *anyone* yesterday afternoon about half-past three?"

"There was a woman," began Willis.

"What sort of a woman?" asked Widgeon.

"Can't say."

"Well anyway, what about the woman?" Widgeon was getting a trifle impatient.

"She bought a ticket."

There was a pause. Widgeon waited for the man to continue: he was anxious not to interrupt any "flow" there might be. But Willis added nothing more.

"Where to?" asked the inspector.

"Dover Street . . . I *think*."

"Did you notice anything about her?"

Willis shook his head.

"The colour of her hat, for instance."

Another shake of the head.

"You don't remember a *man* buying a ticket?"

A pause, a suel of the teeth, and then -

"Can't say."

The inspector nodded and left Willis to continue "Tess." He felt that there might be a happy mean between this man and Mrs. Bateman.

The next person he tackled was the bookstall-keeper, who had seen Grace Unthorne talking to Beacham on the previous morning. After asking a few preliminary questions, Widgeon went on -

"You say that you didn't see the girl in the red hat again in the afternoon?"

"No, gov nor, I didn't."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. But then you see I wasn't exactly looking out for anyone. I was in my box, glancing over the early edition: and you don't notice people from the box, unless you're on the look out."

The place he described as his box was the closed-in section at the end of the bookstall, containing a kind of desk and drawer where the money was kept.

"And you didn't see Mr. Vining come into the station?"

"No, guv'nor."

Widgeon sniffed. An unobservant crowd, this, he thought.

"And the only other official on the station was Beacham?"

"That's 'igh', guv'nor."

The liftman who was standing with them ventured a question

"You don't think, Inspector, that Beacham 'ad anything to do with it, do yer?" he asked.

"I don't think anything, yet," answered Widgeon curtly.

He then left the station and walked round to where his car was waiting for him outside St. George's Hospital.

"Drive to 18a Bedford Row," he said to the police chauffeur.

18a Bedford Row was the address of Brackett, Green and Backhouse, solicitors to the late Mr. Vining. Widgeon's experience had naturally brought him into contact with people of every class, the highest as well as the lowest.

But if there was one type of man from whom he found it more difficult to extract information than another it was a solicitor. Of course solicitors had their clients' interests to consider before everything else, but even so, their caution and their general unwillingness to make a definite statement of any kind, always led Widgeon to regard them as persons torn between reluctance to let the cat out of the bag and desire to see which way it would jump. It was therefore with some misgiving that Widgeon was ushered into the august presence of Mr. Green. The solicitor was an elderly man with silver hair and gold-rimmed spectacles. His eye was clear, and his look unwavering, but benign. His room oozed well-being and solidity.

"Inspector Widgeon?" he said, looking at the latter's card.

Widgeon gave a somewhat deferential nod of his head.

"Pray be seated, Inspector."

There was an old-world touch about Mr. Green, a courtliness, a deliberation and absence of bustle. His crest might have been a tortoise, not rampant: and his motto, "Everything in good time."

"Well, now what can we do for you?" he sing-songed.

"I'm in charge of the investigations into Mr. Vining's death," began Widgeon.

"A terrible case that," chimed in Mr. Green.

"A material point," continued Widgeon, "which will help me in my investigations is a knowledge of who benefits under Mr. Vining's will."

Mr. Green smiled blandly.

"Perhaps before answering any questions, Mr. . . . Inspector," he cooed . . . "I have your card, I think, but . . ."

Widgeon got out his papers and showed them to the solicitor, who submitted them to a careful and leisurely scrutiny.

"Thank you," he said, handing them back to Widgeon. "Well, now about Mr. Vining's will, of course you have no order to produce?"

"No. I don't necessarily want to see the will itself. But you can no doubt assist the law by letting me know its main provisions."

"Whom do you suspect?"

Widgeon shrugged his shoulders. "I have my own ideas," he said.

"You have no order from the executors?"

"As yet, no."

Mr. Green smiled and shook his head gently, yet not definitely enough to indicate a complete negative.

"You can perhaps tell me," suggested Widgeon, "if Captain Jack Ransome is a beneficiary?"

There was a pause, while the solicitor looked down his nose.

"And if I were to say yes, what then?"

"I should then ask you if he benefits to any great extent."

"And if I said to a great extent?"

"A very great extent, indeed, eh?" urged Widgeon.

The solicitor said nothing.

"In other words, Captain Ransome is, at this moment, a very rich man. Will you contradict me?" said Widgeon quickly.

"I shall contradict nothing."

"You have no idea, of course, where Captain Ransome is now?"

"None, sir," replied Mr. Green sternly.

"You knew Mr. Vining well?"

"Not very well. I rarely saw him."

"He didn't consult you about his affairs?"

The solicitor shook his head.

"When did you last see him?"

Mr. Green raised his eyebrows and thought for a moment.

"A long time ago now," he replied. "It's curious," he added after a slight pause.

"What's curious?" asked Widgeon.

"I am so near to seeing him—yesterday."

"How do you mean?"

"He telephoned to me yesterday morning, and asked me to go up to see him at his house in the evening about six o'clock."

"What time did he telephone to you?" asked Widgeon eagerly.

"About a quarter to eleven."

Widgeon stroked his chin. This was indeed news. After a pause—"Did he indicate the nature of the business about which he wanted to see you?" he asked.

Mr. Green looked at the inspector for about half a minute before answering. At length he replied:

"Mr. Vining asked me to bring his will up to him."

§ IX

After leaving the offices of Messrs. Brackett, Green and Backhouse, Widgeon got into his car, and told the man to drive back to Scotland Yard. His visit to the solicitor had certainly justified itself, and he had gained some valuable information. The thought that was uppermost in his mind, as he drove away, was that if Captain Ransome had had a hand in this mad business, he had been extraordinarily clever about it and had acted in the very nick of time. Evidently an opponent to be respected, thought Widgeon—assuming that he *was* an opponent.

The car was passing through the poor district of Endell Street, when it became involved in a traffic block. Widgeon lay back in his seat, absorbed in thought; but his ever-watchful eye roamed over the busy scene and even scanned the faces of the people as they hastened to and fro along the pavements. Suddenly he caught sight of a familiar figure. It was that of a woman, who seemed to be in a hurry as she threaded her way through the jostling crowds. Something in her manner and her gait struck the detective as unusual. . . . He might be quite wrong: after all the sight of a woman hurrying along the pavement was not so very odd. And yet why *should* the late Mr. Vining's secretary, to wit Miss Pamela Jackson, be hurrying along the pavement in Endell Street?

Telling the police-chauffeur to continue on to Scotland Yard, Widgeon got out of the car, and set himself to follow Pamela. She continued down the pavement for some distance and then turned down rather an unsavoury-

looking side street, pausing at the corner evidently to refresh her memory from an envelope which she took from her bag. The name of the side street went by the name of Williams Street, and was quite unfamiliar to Widgeon : he could not connect it with any address or person he had heard of before. He watched Pamela as she walked along the street, keeping her eye on the numbers of the houses. Presently she stopped at, and knocked at, one of the doors. Widgeon made a note of the number 14 Williams Street : he repeated the address several times to himself, trying to think if he had heard of it before. But it conveyed nothing to him whatever.

The door of No. 14 had now been opened by an elderly woman in a cloth cap, who appeared surprised to see such a neatly dressed visitor as Pamela. A short conversation ensued, as far as Widgeon could judge, Pamela appeared to be enquiring for someone, apparently without much success ; for the woman in the cloth cap shook her head several times, and then looked on the ground vaguely as one who might be trying to remember something : finally she shook her head again, and Pamela, with a nod of thanks, left the doorstep and began retracing her steps along the side street walking slowly, as if wrapped in thought.

The detective was undetermined in his mind whether to question Miss Jackson about her visit. He was not at all convinced that it had any bearing whatever on the case, and he was loth to admit that he had been shinning up the wrong tree in following her. However, he thought he might as well make sure—even at the risk of finding a

mare's nest. He approached her just as she had reached the end of the side street and was turning into the main road.

"Excuse me, Miss Jackson," he began.

Pamela swung round suddenly and faced him. At first she hardly seemed to recognise him. But her memory soon served her.

"Inspector . . ?" she exclaimed.

"Widgeon. We've met before, I think, Miss Jackson," answered Widgeon politely.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, or rather, demanded of the inspector, in the startled voice of one who is unexpectedly discovered and immediately tries to turn the tables.

Widgeon appreciated this and smiled.

"I was going to put the same question to you, Miss Jackson," he said.

"Have you . . . Have you been *shadowing* me?" she exclaimed.

"Not exactly shadowing you. I was driving along in my car when I happened to catch sight of you, and . . ." the detective shrugged his shoulders.

". . . and you followed me. Is that it?" demanded Pamela.

"I followed you," assented Widgeon.

"Then I think it's a rotten thing to do!" cried Pamela. It was a childish remark for her to make, and she realised it the minute after she had said it. "I beg your pardon, Inspector," she added quickly. "I didn't mean . . ."

"That's quite all right," Widgeon assured her calmly.

"At the same time," went on Pamela smiling, "I'm afraid you've made a bloomer *this* time, Inspector."

"How so?" asked Widgeon.

"Well, I'm not here for the reason you think I am."

"What reason's that?" asked Widgeon.

"I mean I'm not here for any reason connected with the case you are investigating," answered Pamela.

"What reason *are* you here for then?"

"Is that a fair question? I've told you it's nothing to do with your case."

"It might be," suggested Widgeon. "You never know."

"Well, it isn't."

"Miss Jackson," said the inspector, a little heavily, "I know a little about this case—a little more perhaps than you credit me with. But I want to know a little more still and I look upon you as one of those who are going to help me, not work against me. . . ."

He paused.

"All right," she said "I'll tell you what I am here for . . . if you promise not to tell a soul!"

The detective nodded.

"Oh, that's not good enough, Inspector," protested Pamela. "You must promise—solemnly, I mean."

"Well, I promise," agreed Widgeon, making certain mental reservations.

"Well then," said Pamela, looking right and left to see that no one was listening, and lowering her voice to a whisper "I came to engage a new charwoman! Good-bye, Inspector!"

She was about to dart away from him, when quick as lightning the inspector caught her by the wrist and held her like a vice.

"No good trying that game on me, young lady," said Widgeon indulgently. "I'm too old a hand for that."

"Oh, Inspector, you're hurting me," pleaded Pamela. He loosened his grip slightly but kept tight hold.

"Let go or I shall scream!" cried the girl.

"Come, come, Miss Jackson. They know me in these parts, you're not likely to get much help if you *do* scream. I shan't hurt you. I just want to know a little bit more about this charwoman you're thinking of engaging, that's all."

"What more do you want to know?" asked Pamela.

"Well, for instance, did you engage her?"

"N-no," answered Pamela with some hesitation.

"Unsatisfactory?"

Pamela nodded.

"Where did you get her address from?"

"A friend gave it me."

"What's your friend's name?" asked Widgeon quickly.

Pamela hesitated.

"Do you want the charwoman for yourself—or for someone else?"

"For mys—no for someone else. I . . ."

Widgeon, who still had hold of Pamela's arm, began moving her gently down the alley again.

"What are you doing? Let go," panted the girl.

"That's all right," smiled Widgeon. "We looked so

odd just standing at the corner. It looks more natural to take a little walk . . ."

"What do you mean?" cried Pamela. She allowed the inspector to walk her along, because to resist would have meant a scene, with plenty of roughs and toughs to gather round and make a crowd. And the last thing Pamela wanted to be was the centre of a crowd.

"I don't mean anything but what I say," replied Widgeon, ". . . and I hope you mean the same, Miss Jackson."

By this time they had reached No. 14, and before Pamela realised what was happening, Widgeon had knocked at the door.

"Inspector Widgeon," began Pamela, "I don't know what you mean by this. You're butting into a purely private matter. It wasn't true what I said about a char woman . . ."

"I know it wa n't," observed Widgeon dryly.

"Well, let me explain--there's nothing . . ."

At this moment the door was opened by the woman in the cloth cap. If she had been surprised on the first occasion to see Pamela on her doorstep alone, she was still more surprised to see the same young lady, arm in arm, with a man, who seemed to be holding her rather more tightly than was necessary. Her surprise gave way to complete astonishment when the young lady, immediately on seeing her exclaimed :

"Don't answer any of his questions! I mean . . ."

"Listen to me!" cut in Widgeon sternly. "I'm a detective-inspector from Scotland Yard."

"Oh, *please* . . ." cried Pamela.

"Calm yourself, dearie," interrupted the cloth cap. "You ain't done nothing wrong, *I'm* sure. Nor ain't I. So there, Inspector, what's the gime?"

"There's no game," said Widgeon. "What did this lady want when she came here just now?"

The woman looked at Pamela.

"Now what *did* she want, I wonder?" mused the cloth cap. "What *did* yer want, dearie, for I'm sure *I* dunno."

Pamela bit her lip, but said nothing. This would have been her opening to suggest the story of the charwoman, but she had already made an admission on that point.

"Quit this fooling," rapped out Widgeon.

The woman obviously wanted impressing still further.

"This is a case of murder," he went on, "and I can arrest you on suspicion and have your house searched."

"Lor, there ain't bin no murder round 'ere, 'as there, Mister?" asked the woman, genuinely impressed this time.

"Never you mind where the murder's been committed," retorted Widgeon. "You just tell me what this lady wanted just now."

The woman looked at him and hesitated before answering.

"Come on," said Widgeon. "You needn't stop to invent something."

"She asked for someone as I'd never 'eard on," replied the woman guardedly.

"What name?" demanded the Inspector.

"That's up to you, ain't it, dearie?" parried the woman, looking at Pamela.

"Inspector," said Pamela, "this woman knows nothing whatever. I came here to ask for someone; but I found that that someone does not live here, and that I had made a mistake in the address."

"That's right," said the woman quickly. "Straight it is!"

"How long have you been at this address?" asked Widgeon.

"We only bin 'ere a matter of four weeks, Inspector," she replied.

"Who was here before you came?"

"Ask me another," replied the woman.

"What's your name?"

"Mrs. Chinnery's my name, and very respectable folk we are too!"

"All right, Mrs. Chinnery," said Widgeon, "only I think for this lady's sake you may be sorry that you can't tell me a little more. Good afternoon."

"T're, wot's that," exclaimed Mrs. Chinnery. "Wot yer going to do with the lady?"

"She's coming with me to Scotland Yard. You see, if you won't tell me what she said, she'll have to tell me herself."

"T're it ain't none of my business, dearie," said Mrs. Chinnery to Pamela, "but why don't yer make a clean breast of it? It's best in the end 't' straight it is."

"What do you want to know, Inspector?" asked Pamela in a low and rather tired voice.

"That's better, Miss Jackson," said Widgeon not unkindly. "Perhaps if Mrs. Chinnery doesn't mind we'll have our little talk indoors. I think the young lady would be glad of a seat if you've no objection."

Mrs. Chinnery thereupon led her two unexpected visitors into the little front parlour of her modest abode, and placed a horsehair chair for Pamela to sit on.

"Why did you come here?" asked Widgeon gently.

"I thought Fred Beacham lived here," answered Pamela, almost under her breath.

"Beacham!" exclaimed Mrs Chinnery. "That's the name I was trying to think of! They was the people 'ere before us in this 'ouse."

"I tried to find him at Hyde Park Station," went on Pamela in a monotonous voice, "but he wasn't there, and one of the men gave me this address to come to . . . He evidently made a mistake," she added faintly.

"I'm afraid I'll have to trouble you to show me the note you have in your bag," said Widgeon.

Pamela flared up.

"Why should I show it you?" she demanded. "It's private property. What right have you to see it?"

"In the circumstances I shall have to see it," replied Widgeon calmly.

"And if I refuse to show it to you?"

"I shouldn't advise you to refuse," urged Widgeon. "It'll be so . . . undignified."

Mrs. Chinnery, who had been standing in one corner with her arms akimbo, listening to the conversation, suddenly clapped in.

"Better make a clean breast of it, dearie," she said. "If they don't 'ave yer one way, they'll 'ave you another."

"Yes, I'm afraid that's so," agreed Widgeon.

Silently and shamefacedly Pamela took the note from her bag, and put it on the table. Widgeon picked it up. It was addressed to "Mr Fred Beacham." He tore it open. The note inside contained no date, and was addressed to no one. It ran:

"For God's sake don't split on me.

G."

Widgeon gazed at the note for some time without speaking. Then he folded it up carefully and put it in his pocket-case.

"You know the contents of this note?" he asked Pamela.

"No, I don't," she replied in a voice that seemed to lack all interest.

"When did Grace Unthorne give it to you?"

"This afternoon. But I'll swear to this, Inspector Widgeon," she added with conviction, "that Grace is absolutely innocent of any connection with Mr. Vining's death."

"I hope so," observed the Inspector.

§ x

Widgeon reached Scotland Yard that evening about six-thirty, after an absence of nearly five and a half hours.

He glanced through the reports that had been sent in (some of them almost hourly) on the movements of the various people connected with the case whom he was having watched. The reports were all satisfactory so far as the people being watched were concerned--which meant that they were unsatisfactory so far as the solution of the case was concerned: for it was brought no nearer by any of the reports. Moreover there was still no trace of Captain Ransome or of Suleiman, the Malayan.

The inspector sat down and took from his dispatch-case the tin box in which he had placed the litter found on the floor of the lift shaft. He was about to open it and examine the contents, when Dr. Willing was announced. The doctor had an air of preoccupation about him or was it suppressed excitement? In one hand he held his hat, and in the other a book.

"Been trying to get your mind off this business?" asked Widgeon indicating the book. "No time for reading myself," he added.

Dr. Willing waited till the orderly sergeant, who had shown him in, had gone, and then with an almost portentous air, he approached Widgeon's desk.

"I think I've got hold of something, Inspector," he announced.

Widgeon, who was never above learning something from an amateur, assumed an interested look and waited for the doctor to proceed.

"I've been thinking a good deal about this man Suleiman and trying to find some explanation of his being in that telephone box," continued Willing. "When you're

dealing with these Orientals I believe in getting to know something of the habits and customs of the places they come from. So I got hold of this book and was glancing through it, when I came across these two passages. Read them and tell me what you think."

The book in question was entitled "The Malayan People," and the passages indicated to Widgeon by the doctor, ran as follows:

"They (the Malayan people) used to be described as the most cruel and treacherous people in the world, and they certainly are callous of the pain suffered by others and regard any strategy of which their enemies are the victims with open admiration. In ordinary circumstances, however, the Malay is not treacherous, and it is unfair to judge the people as a whole from those somewhat exceptional cases, where a Malay who has been known over a period of years to be normal and law-abiding, suddenly apparently for no good reason becomes subject to the most extraordinary lapses of low cunning and treachery. Such cases, though they are exceptional, make it difficult and unwise for Malaysians to be placed in any position of trust or responsibility or to be adopted as domestic or personal servants.

"Much has been written concerning the acts of homicidal mania called *amuck* (*amok*) which word in the vernacular means 'to attack.' It is believed that these outbursts are to be attributed to madness *pur et simple* and some cases of *amok* can certainly be traced to this source . . . The typical *amok* is usually the result of

circumstances which render a Malay desperate. The motive is often inadequate from the point of view of an European, but to the Malay it is sufficient to make him weary of life and anxious to court death. Briefly where a man of another race might not improbably commit suicide, a Malay runs *amok*, killing all whom he may meet. . . .

"The nervous affliction called *latah* to which many Malays are subject, is also a curious trait of the people. The victims of this affliction lose for the time all self-control and all sense of their own identity, imitating the actions of any person who chances to rivet their attention."

The second passage, a few pages further on in the book, ran :

"The principal weapon of the Malays is the *kris*, a short dagger with a small wooden or ivory handle of which there are many varieties. The blade of a *kris* may either be wavy or straight, but if wavy the number of waves must always be uneven. The *kris* most prized by the Malays are those of *Bugis* (*Celebes*) manufacture, and of those the kind called *tuusek* are of the greatest value. Besides the short *kris*, the Malays use long straight *kris* with narrow blades, shorter straight *kris* of the same form, short broad swords called *sundang*, long swords of ordinary pattern called *pedang*, somewhat shorter swords curved like scimitars with curiously carved handles called *chenangkak*, and

short stabbing daggers called *tumbok lada*. The principal tools of the Malays are the *parang*, or *gôlok*, a heavy knife used in the jungle, without which no peasant ever stirs abroad from his house. . . .

"It is hardly necessary to say that the Malays have attained an extraordinary proficiency in the use of all their weapons, particularly the short straight *kris* and the stabbing dagger. In the individual fights which frequently take place on board ship, the Malay will always gain an easy victory over the foreigner, who is usually as clumsy as the Malay is expert in the use of the dagger. Moreover it is not only at close quarters that the dagger of a Malay is to be feared: for he finds it equally easy to hit the mark by casting his dagger from a distance. This is an art which has been practised over generations and has been perfected by the Malays as by no other people in the world. Their unerring aim, even at considerable distances, is truly remarkable."*

*(There is a footnote added here.) The writer remembers very well in 1878 watching a display of this dagger throwing at Singapore. The marksmanship was of an extremely high standard and several of the throwers came within one and two inches of the mark (which was about the size of a penny) at distances of seventy and eighty yards."

"You see the idea?" started the doctor as soon as Widgeon had finished reading. "Leave aside for a moment the question of motive. For all I know there may have

been a very good motive ; but in any case you never know where you are with these Orientals, and they may regard as adequate something that we wouldn't give a second thought to. Anyway, leave that aside for the moment. Assume that Suleiman is bent on killing Vining. He watches for him to go into the station and then dodges into the other entrance—or rather the exit part of the station, and into the telephone box, *exactly opposite*, mark you, the lift in which Vining went down in. Now comes the tricky business. Without being noticed by anyone he has got to cast his dagger in such a way as to hit Vining in a vulnerable place. There are two possibilities, one much easier for Suleiman than the other. Take the easy one first ; as you know, when a lift comes to the top the exit doors are flung open and the people stream out ; in this case the exit doors are those nearest to and immediately opposite to the telephone boxes ; now it often happens that the exit doors are left open for some time after all the passengers have gone from the lift, and are still open when new passengers enter the lift *by the other doors* in order to be taken down. Assume that to have been the case here. Vining enters the lift and stands in it waiting to go down ; the *exit* doors are still open. Suleiman takes his time and watches for his opportunity. At the right moment—say when Vining's back is turned—Suleiman hurls the dagger, which buries itself in Vining's back. Vining, being struck in the back, instinctively begins to turn round and face the enemy, and in doing so falls forward *against* the corner of the lift. It is dark in the lift, and the liftman, being outside and probably not look-

ing too carefully at the still upright figure in the lift, closes the further gates (he does this by pressing a button outside the lift on the other side) as well as the entrance gates and sends the lift down "

The doctor paused for breath. Widgeon rubbed his nose gently up and down.

" 'That's one possibility,' continued the doctor. "Of course I've only outlined it very roughly, but you can see the idea. The other possibility presents more difficulty: it is the case where the exit doors of the lift have already been shut, and Suleiman in the telephone box is, as it were, cut off from his intended victim. *But is he really cut off?* Consider these so-called exit doors. One of them is the iron gate of the lift itself, the expanding and contracting kind you know. When the gate is drawn across the lift, it would be easy for anyone with a good eye like Suleiman to cast a dagger through the bars. But the other door—the door of the lift shaft as you might call it

is a very different proposition. It's made of wood and is *practically* solid. *But there is* in it a kind of broken panel (intended I suppose for ventilation) about the same height from the ground as a man's shoulder blades. It is just possible that someone with an extraordinary accurate aim could cast a dagger through this ventilation panel and through the bars of the inner gates and "

The doctor broke off. He had conceived the idea somewhat hastily, and when he came to put it into words, he felt somehow that it was not very convincing. There was a slight frown on Widgeon's face, a frown of incredulity.

"Mind you," went on Dr. Willing, "the chances are that the exit doors would have been open . . . And anyhow, if it wasn't done in this way, I should like to know how it *was* done."

"I think the theory is, to say the least, very improbable," ventured Widgeon.

"Improbable, I agree," said Willing, "but not impossible."

"No, not impossible," agreed Widgeon. "But take one point. You say that Mr. Vining, being struck in the back, would instinctively turn round, and *then* fall forward. I should have thought that he'd hardly have had time to do that. I should have thought he would have fallen forward at once."

"Well . . ." the doctor hesitated.

"In which case, assuming that the ticket collector didn't see him fall (which is inconceivable), he would have been lying on the floor of the lift, instead of propped up against the corner of it. Of course I'm thinking of the dagger coming from the telephone box: now if Mr. Vining had been standing facing the telephone box, and the dagger had been thrown *from the other direction*, then he might quite well have fallen forward against the corner of the lift."

"Yes," said the doctor, "but Suleiman was in the telephone box and who else could have thrown it? You don't suppose the ticket-collector threw it, do you? There was no one else."

"No," said Widgeon slowly. "I suppose there was no one else." He appeared to have sunk into thought and

for some minutes the two men sat in silence. At length Widgeon picked up the book which was lying open before him and handed it back to the doctor.

"I admire your ingenuity, Doctor," he said, "but I think you do too much credit to our Malayan friend. After all, if he wanted to murder his master he could surely have chosen easier methods. The risk of discovery in this instance would have been enormous: in fact it would only have been equalled by the difficulty of performance."

"Well, have *you* got any theories to put forward?" asked the doctor. "How do *you* think this thing was done?"

Widgeon had opened his mouth to answer, when there was a knock at the door and the orderly sergeant brought in an envelope and gave it to the inspector, who opened it and read the contents. For some time he did not speak, but the doctor knew from the expression on his face that the news, whatever it was, had some significance.

"This," said Widgeon at length, "is the report of the finger-print expert."

"Ah!" exclaimed the doctor, not without excitement. "What does he say?"

"He says that the finger-prints round the lock of this corner cupboard are identical with those which appear on nearly every object in the room of . . ."

"Of whom?"

"Of Suleiman, the Malay," answered Widgeon.

§ XI

Inspector Widgeon pressed an electric button on his table, and the orderly sergeant entered.

"Bring in Beacham," commanded the inspector.

The orderly sergeant disappeared and a few moments later returned ushering in the unfortunate Fred Beacham who had been a prisoner--albeit a well-treated prisoner--all day. The liftman began speaking as soon as he entered the room.

"Look 'ere," he exclaimed with some warmth, "I should like to know what powers you got to keep me 'ere like this! I demand to be let go! I ain't done nothin' wrong, and I'll have the law on yer, straight I will, if you don't let me out. It's agin the law . . ."

"Don't you go talking too much about the law," interrupted Widgeon, "or you'll find yourself the wrong side of it, my man. You answer the questions that are put to you first, and then you can talk about the law."

Beacham grunted.

"Have you remembered yet," continued Widgeon, "what you were talking to Grace Unthorne about yesterday morning?"

"No," said Beacham stubbornly, "I 'aven't. And I'm not likely to either."

Widgeon shrugged his shoulders. "Still obstinate, eh?" he mused. "Well, you can take your own time about it, but I shall have it out of you sooner or later."

" I wonder if I might ask him a question, Inspector ? " It was the mild voice of Dr. Willing.

Beacham turned towards him, and as Widgeon made no sign, Willing continued.

" Did you notice," he asked Beacham, " when Mr. Vining entered the lift, were the *further* gates of the lift open or shut ? "

Beacham eyed the doctor frowning. He did not feel in the mood for answering any questions.

" Gawd knows ! " he said. " I'm fair fed up with the 'ole business. 'Ow do you expect me to remember every blooming thing that 'appened ? "

" Try and remember," suggested the doctor. " It's an important point and may have a considerable bearing on the whole case, and incidentally on your . . . er . . . liberty."

Beacham gave a grudging consideration to the question that had been put to him.

" I dunno," he replied at length. " I think the farther gates was open and then after 'e got in I shut 'em. But I ain't sure. Wot's the gime ? "

" When you sent the lift down," continued the doctor, " you're sure that Mr. Vining was *standing up* and not leaning up against the wall ? "

" Standing up," grunted Beacham.

" Quite sure ? " queried the doctor.

" Oh, Gawd, I dunno. I dunno nothink. I want to get out o' this place. I bin 'ere a'l day, most likely lost a day's pay, and all 'cos I was talking to a girl. Ain't there no

justice in this country? Wot's wrong in talking to a girl, I should like to know!"

Beacham's outburst was interrupted by the telephone bell. Widgeon picked up the receiver.

"Show her up," he ordered.

A moment later Grace Unthorne was shown into the room. She appeared to be "all hot and bothered" and very ill at ease. She started slightly on catching sight of Fred Beacham, but before she could open her mouth to speak, Widgeon motioned her to sit down in the chair beside his desk, and ordered Beacham to stand immediately behind her. He then seated himself at his desk and picked up his long black ruler.

"Now, you two," he began. "I want to know what the game is. You'd best be quite frank with me. You, Grace Unthorne, were with Colonel Robinson yesterday morning: you left him and walked to Hyde Park Tube Station and were seen talking to Beacham. You spent about five minutes talking to him. All I want you to tell me is why you stopped and talked to him, and what passed between you."

For a moment neither Grace nor Beacham spoke. Grace attempted to look round and catch Beacham's eye, but Widgeon interrupted her.

"Look at me, please, Miss Grace," he said, "and answer my question."

"Me and him's friends," answered Grace shortly.

"So you said before," observed the inspector.

Grace said nothing more. Widgeon then looked at Beacham.

"You spoke to Grace yesterday morning," he said. "Did you speak to her again yesterday afternoon?"

"No," replied Beacham with a frown.

"*Did you see her again yesterday afternoon at Hyde Park Tube Station?*" asked the inspector sternly. "Be careful how you answer!"

Beacham said nothing and looked down towards the top of Grace's red hat.

"Why don't you answer?" cried Grace quickly. "What are you waiting for?"

"Quiet!" snapped the inspector to Grace, and then to Beacham, "did you see her yesterday afternoon about three-thirty?"

"I dunno," muttered Beacham "I . . ."

This was too much for Grace. She jumped up from her chair.

"What do you mean, 'you don't know?'" she exclaimed. "You *couldn't* have seen me yesterday afternoon."

"D'yer mean to say yer *didn't* come to the station yesterday afternoon?" cried Beacham thoroughly astonished.

"Of course I didn't," retorted the girl. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, I'm blowed!" Beacham half smiled. "Why, Inspector," he said, "there's bin a misunderstanding. I was thinking I saw her yesterday afternoon . . . I 'spose it was the red 'at wot done it. I didn't 'ave time to notice her proper, you know. But it was the red 'at . . . Well o' course that makes all the difference!"

"Now perhaps you'll explain," remarked Widgeon.

"Well, it's this way," said Beacham. "It's quite right that I was talking to Grace yesterday morning, and I noticed at the time that she was wearing a red 'at. Now in the afternoon I saw a girl in the station wearin' a red 'at, and I thinks to myself that's Grace again."

"But surely," cut in Widgeon, "you couldn't have mistaken every girl with a red hat for Grace!"

"No, you see it was this way," replied Beacham. "I only saw 'er 'at, as she was disappearing down the stairs. I thought it a bit odd at the time, and wondered wot Grace was doing, going down them stairs. In fact, I was beginning to think it wasn't Grace, despite of the 'at. 'Then o' course the gen'leman wot followed her down and then come up again and went into the lift and was found murdered, turned out to be Mr. Vinin': and I knew she was in 'is service, and so I thought it *must* have been Grace wot I saw."

"Hold on a bit!" exclaimed Widgeon. "What's this you're saving about a girl in a red hat going down some stairs, and Mr. Vining following her? This is new. Just explain exactly what you saw."

"Well, I'm telling yer," answered Beacham. "I'd just sent one of the lifts down, and naturally had my back to the entrance of the station, so that I didn't see nobody come in. When I did turn round, I see a girl in a red 'at—which I *thought* to be Grace's—disappearing down them stairs leading to the spiral staircase, wot passengers sometimes use when there ain't no lifts and they're in a hurry. Following her down them stairs—leastways going

down a little way be'ind 'er—was a man. There weren't nothing very extraordinary about that, 'cept that I wondered wot Grace was doin' going down them stairs. In fact I nearly nipped down after 'er—and then I didn't."

Beacham paused. Dr. Willing who was sitting by the window suddenly sneezed, and remarking that he was sitting in a draught, moved his chair nearer to the middle of the room.

"Go on," said the inspector to Beacham.

"Well, shortly after that, the gen'leman who had gone down the stairs comes up again and goes into the empty lift, which I sends down. When 'e gets to the bottom 'e's discovered dead and it turns out that he's Mr. Vining."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" demanded the inspector.

"Well, it weren't none o' my business," replied Beacham lamely. "'Sides, I wasn't going to say nothing that might 'urt Grace, 'cos, you see, I thought it was Grace I saw going down the stairs."

Widgeon grunted. Whatever finer feelings a man might have towards a woman, they shouldn't take precedence of the law. The inspector made this plain to Beacham in no uncertain terms; then, having lost over twenty-four hours, he proceeded to make good this loss as best he could.

"You say," he said to Beacham, "that the man who was following this girl—whoever she was—down the stairs came up again shortly afterwards?"

"Yes," replied Beacham.

"How do you know it was the same man?"

"Well, I knew 'e was the same man, 'cos I'd only just seen 'im the minute before. I 'appened to notice the broad brimmed 'at 'e was wearing. Besides there aren't so many people about that time o' day : 'tain't as if there'd been a crowd. I might 'a got confused then."

"He came up the stairs and walked straight into the lift, eh ? "

"Yes."

"Did he speak to you ? "

"No ! "

"You say that some people, when they're in a hurry, go down the stairs in order to get to the great spiral stairway instead of taking the lift. If this man went down the stairs and immediately came up again, he obviously wasn't making for the spiral stairway. Why else should he have gone down those stairs ? "

Beacham glanced at Grace before answering.

"None o' that ! " snapped out Widgeon. " Answer my question."

" 'Orl right, 'orl right ! " drawled Beacham. " 'S only delicacy on my part. If you must know why a man should go down them stairs, it would be to go to the gents' lavatory. I can't say straighter than that, can I ? "

"All right," said Widgeon shortly. " Did you see the lady in the red hat come up the stairs again ? "

"No, I didn't," replied Fred. " But that's not to say she didn't come up again."

"But if you thought it was Grace, you'd be looking out for her, wouldn't you ? " suggested the inspector.

"Not specially, 'cos I only 'ad a vague idea it might

be Grace at first : it was only after I knew that it was Mr. Vining who had been following her—leastways I suppose he was following her--that I *really* thought it was Grace, by hinference, as you might say."

"This man who came into the station following the girl in the red hat—did you see him take a ticket at the booking office?"

"Can't say as I did."

"Did you see the girl take a ticket?"

Beacham shook his head. "I had my back to the entrance I tell you at the time she must'a' come in."

There was a pause, while the inspector toyed with his black ruler. Then he asked casually :

"Did you happen to notice whether the man who entered the lift was carrying anything?"

Beacham thought for a moment, and shook his head.

"A coat or a makintosh for instance?" suggested Widgeon.

"Oh ave," replied Beacham, "now I come to think of it, 'e did have a macl into h with him."

"Was he wearing it?"

"No," answered Beacham slowly, "'e was carrying it on 'is shoulder, I think."

"Which shoulder?" asked Beacham.

"Now you got me. That's more'n I can say."

"Did you notice whether the man who was following the girl downstairs was carrying a makintosh?"

"I don't remember. You don't recollect' everythink you see, casual like. 'Sides, 'e was going downstairs and

I could only see part of him. I don't know where 'e got the mackintosh from if 'e wasn't carrying it. They don't give 'em away downstairs, you know."

The inspector nodded. Grace had been silent all the time that Widgeon had been putting his questions. She was feeling a certain amount of resentment because Fred Beacham had imagined that she might have had a hand in luring Vining to his death. As there was a pause, she looked up.

"Can I go now?" she asked the inspector.

Widgeon looked at her and a faint smile came into his face.

"I suppose," he said, "that as Beacham so unhesitatingly accepts your statement that you were not at Hyde Park Station yesterday afternoon, I'm expected to do the same, eh?"

"I'm not lyin'! I'm not that sort," protested Grace. "You can ask anybody . . ."

"Whom, for instance?" queried Widgeon.

"I'm not lyin'! You believe me, don't you, Fred?" She turned to Beacham.

"She's tellin' the truth, straight she is, mister." There was a note of real sincerity in the ticket collector's voice. Perhaps the ticket collector himself realised it, for he checked himself and said no more.

"You seem to know Grace pretty well," observed Widgeon.

Beacham hung his head.

"I do."

"By the way," went on Widgeon brightly. "I've got

a note here for you—from Grace, I believe. I was curious enough to read it.”

He handed Beacham the envelope that he had taken from Pamela. Beacham read it and crumpled it up in his hand.

“Didn’t you know better than that, Grace?” he said to the girl.

Grace’s eyes filled with tears and she could hardly speak.

“You . . . don’t know what it meant for me,” she said half sobbing.

“I think I understand,” said Widgeon not unkindly to Grace. “It’s a pity that it’s all happened like this.”

“I was terribly afraid that it’d all come out in public,” went on Grace. “It’s bad enough as it is. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to do. I only knew yesterday morning. That was what we spoke about . . .”

She wept bitterly now.

“You’re a fine sort of chap,” said the inspector sternly to Beacham. “Why can’t you stick to your wife, ’stead of messing about . . . like this?”

“You dunno my wife!” exclaimed Beacham defiantly; then he checked himself again and remained silent.

“Come Grace.” It was kindly Dr. Willing, who came forward and laid his hands gently on Grace’s shoulder. “Come. I’ll take you home. We’ll see this business through all right. You mustn’t cry. Come.”

He led her gently to the door. Beacham followed them out slowly.

As soon as they had gone the inspector picked up the telephone on his desk. His order was short and to the point.

§ XII

Inspector Widgeon had not pressed Grace Unthorne or Fred Beacham for further details. Beacham's evidence had shed a great light on the whole case – the light, in fact, that Widgeon had been seeking. That was enough, and there was no need to pursue investigations that were as irrelevant as they might be painful. The fact that Grace Unthorne, an unmarried servant girl, had "got into trouble" with Fred Beacham, a married man, and was probably going to have a child by him, was sufficient to explain a good many things. It explained, in particular, all the reticence that Grace and Fred had shown over their conversation of the previous day. The poor girl had been terrified of what she called "her shame" being made public; and it was this terror that had prompted her to send the incriminating note to Beacham. She had not known of his detention at Scotland Yard, and was afraid of being seen with him in public again. She had therefore cast about for a friend on whom she could rely to carry a message to him and had picked on Pamela Jackson, who had always been kind and sympathetic toward her. Pamela had taken the note to Hyde Park Station, and finding that Beacham was not there had enquired his address from another ticket collector, a friend of his, who had given her Beacham's old address

in ignorance of the fact that he had moved from there some weeks before. It was during her visit to his old address that Widgeon had come upon her.

Widgeon himself had never been inclined to suspect Grace of playing a leading part in the mystery of Laurence Vining's death, and he was relieved that he could let her go. She had enough trouble of her own without being mixed up with a possible murder. The fact of the red hat, Widgeon put down as either a coincidence or else the result of a fiendish plot to implicate an innocent girl. On the whole everything pointed to it being a coincidence.

After hearing Beacham's new evidence, Widgeon had more than an inkling of the *manner* in which Vining had met his death. But the immediate *reason* for it was by no means clear. As yet there was very little to go upon. He glanced through the reports once again. Jack Ransome, still at large. Sukiman still at large. But they were bound to be tracked before long. Widgeon had great faith in his minions.

He then turned his attention to the little tin box containing the refuse and litter from the floor of the lift shaft. He went through everything in the box twice over, and found nothing of the slightest interest or bearing on the case. After Beacham's evidence however, this puzzled rather than disappointed him.

The inspector then set himself to think. He thought very hard, and the more he thought, the easier he found it to visualise the scene as it must have been enacted on the previous afternoon at Hy 13 Park Tube Station, but the more difficult it became for him to recognise the

faces of the actors. He realised, more clearly than ever before, that he was up against something out of the common, some devilishly ingenious plot, planned with more than ordinary care and executed with consummate audacity. Slowly the light began to break. With no more to go upon than his investigations of the last twenty-four hours had revealed to him he not only pieced together the whole scene, but he filled in the faces of at least one of the actors. It was a shot in the dark, and must be tested without delay. . . .

While the Chief was thus meditating upon the problem, in the peace and comfort of his room at headquarters, his henchmen were busily at work not only in the highways and by-ways of London, but throughout the length and breadth of the land. The long arm of the Law was being exerted to its utmost, in search of the two wanted men, Captain Jack Ransome and Suleiman, the Malayan. Their names were on everybody's lips: photographs and descriptions of them were appearing in almost every newspaper in the country. Still they could not be found.

It was now eight o'clock in the evening on the day after Vining's death, and along a street in the East End of London there sloped the tired and haggard figure of a man. All day he had wandered, alone, friendless and hunted, scarcely daring even to buy food for himself, for fear of being discovered. The kind of experience he had had earlier in the day with the men in the timber yard, had been repeated again and again, always in that half-

jesting tone of the Englishman who refuses to believe that anything sensational can ever happen to *him*. Loafers and the like, with whom Suleiman could hardly help exchanging a word or two at street corners, had remarked on his likeness to the wanted man, and yet it had never entered the head of any one of them that they were actually standing face to face with the very man himself. Had Suleiman (who incidentally had never read any of Poe's tales) only realised it, his best hiding place was where every¹body could see him. But quite excusably perhaps--he did not realise it: the fact that he had not yet been discovered, he regarded as little less than a miracle, and he felt much as Inspector Widgeon felt, only more acutely, that he was bound to be caught before long. It was only a matter of hours, perhaps only of minutes. This reflection, which had weighed on his mind all day, had reduced him, by the evening, to a state verging on nervous collapse. He had never been remarkable for his strength of mind, and the strain of suspense had told upon him to such an extent that his thoughts were hardly coherent and he scarcely knew what he was doing. To reason with himself about his position, to work out a sensible plan, indeed to "think straight" at all--these things were quite beyond his present powers. He could only drag himself along aimlessly and wonder vaguely when he would be caught up and whisked off to some underground dungeon where he would be slowly tortured to death! Such was the only fate he could imagine to be in store for him.

There is little doubt that he would have continued to

wander about the streets all that night and all next day, and probably the day after that—indefinitely in fact, had not his own almost insane precipitancy cut his wanderings short. The end came in rather an absurd way. It was just after eight o'clock, and he was walking slowly along a somewhat crowded thoroughfare, casting furtive glances at the people who were passing, none of whom were taking the least notice of him. Suddenly he became aware that someone was pointing at him from the other side of the road. The someone in question was an old woman of immense proportions, who had been waddling along the pavement accompanied by a young and rather villainous-looking man; she had apparently stopped in the middle of the pavement and, at the moment when Suleiman caught sight of her, she was undoubtedly pointing an umbrella in his direction. The man at her side looked round, also in Suleiman's direction, and immediately began to run across the road towards him. That was enough for the Malayan. It was the moment he had been expecting, ever since he had crept out of his wooden shed just below Hungerford Bridge. The game was up. He saw the man coming towards him, and with one stifled yell and almost blinded with fear, he took to his heels. In spite of the people on the pavement he made astonishing progress. He had run more than seventy-five yards (without bumping into more than three people and knocking over one small boy) before the passers-by began to realise that a runaway lunatic was apparently in their midst. One or two men started to follow him, shouting and signalling to others in front to stop him. Pale as his dark skin would

allow him to be, and foaming at the mouth, Suleiman sped on. He had not the slightest idea where to make for, or what had happened to the man who he supposed was his original pursuer. (As a matter of fact this man had never had any idea of pursuing Suleiman : who or what he *was* pursuing, only he and the old woman with the umbrella knew). All Suleiman was aware of was that the whole street seemed to be watching him and that it could only be a matter of seconds before he was caught. Suddenly he came upon a large and solid policeman in his path. Without a moment's thought or hesitation he did probably the wisest thing he could have done. He threw himself almost bodily into the arms of this somewhat astonished minion of the law.

Broadly speaking, there is no more calm and impassive class of the community than the police. They are of all people the best at keeping their heads in an emergency, and in common with the British aristocracy regard it as bad form to exhibit surprise even in the most surprising circumstances. There are however exceptional occasions, and this was undoubtedly one of them. This policeman could well be excused a little mild astonishment.

" 'Ul-lo," he exclaimed, " 'Ul-lo, what's the game ! "

The terrified Malayan continued to embrace him like a long-lost brother.

" Take me ! " he cried breathlessly in his jerky English
" Take me ! You look for me ! Here we are ! "

Not without some difficulty the policeman unwound Suleiman and put him down as it were, on his two feet.

" Now then," he said, " what's the trouble, darkie?"

Suleiman stared at him with bead-like eyes, and wagged his head from side to side, still panting for breath.

"Take me!" he repeated. "I am what you want!"

"The devil you are!" answered the constable. "And what should I be wanting with you?"

"You not know?" continued Suleiman in a high-pitched voice. "Everybody look for me to-day. I am innocent, I swear!"

"Blimey! You don't say—By gum! You're not Suleiman, the Malayan!" roared the policeman.

The look of terror returned to Suleiman's eyes. He nodded weakly.

"You just come along o' me, my lad!" ordered the constable, and together they marched off to the nearest police station, a small crowd of people following in their wake. The policeman could hardly refrain from reflecting as he walked along, upon the extraordinary good luck that had dropped this much-sought-after man into his arms. Already visions of official congratulation and even of promotion began to float before him. The Malayan had lapsed into a moody silence: his main feeling was probably one of deep relief. The strain of evading discovery had suddenly been loosed, and the reaction that set in took the form of a dull and heavy moroseness.

They reached the police station and the policeman issued the usual warning about any statement that Suleiman might feel inclined to make. Suleiman however refused to say anything and there remained nothing for the policeman to do but to telephone immediately to the Yard and report his capture.

Widgeon was pleased with the news, though not quite so ecstatically as his subordinates might have expected. He ordered them to have Suleiman brought up to him without delay.

In due course Suleiman arrived at the Yard, and after sundry precautions had been taken, he was ushered into Widgeon's room. The inspector, who had been writing, put down his pen and took a good look at his visitor. He was not exactly an engaging spectacle; his clothes were dirty and torn, his face was sweaty and haggard, his hands shook and fear stood in his eyes. Widgeon motioned him into the chair at the side of his desk. Suleiman practically collapsed into it. He seemed entirely overcome, and it was not without considerable difficulty that Widgeon got him to answer a few preliminary questions. To a subsequent question asking him to give some account of his movement on the previous day, his only reply was a reference to Colonel Robinson.

"Mister Robinson, he know. He know all."

And that was about all the inspector could get out of him. Clearly Colonel Robinson must be summoned before any further information would be forthcoming. Widgeon therefore dispatched a man forthwith to fetch the Colonel, and in the meantime he gave orders for Suleiman to be cleaned and fed. He then returned to his writing.

Three-quarters of an hour later, that is to say at about 10.30 that night, Colonel Robinson entered the inspector's room.

"Good evening, Colonel," said Widgeon. "I'm sorry

to disturb you so late in the evening, but for the moment we don't seem able to get on without you. You've no doubt heard that Mr. Vining's Malayan servant has been at large for some time . . . ?"

"Well, I'm afraid I don't know where he is," replied Robinson stiffly.

"He's in the next room, and I gather that he'd like to see you."

The Colonel gave a slight start, and his attitude at once became more friendly and deferential.

"Really? That's smart work, Inspector. I'll just step along and see him now, if I may."

"One moment," said Widgeon, raising his hand, "perhaps it would be better for us to have a little talk before we see Suleiman. We must be frank with each other about this matter, Colonel."

The inspector eyed his man steadily.

"Certainly," agreed the Colonel.

"A little franker perhaps than you have been with me up to now," went on Widgeon.

The Colonel was silent. Widgeon was anxious to clear up certain points in connection with Suleiman's visit to Colonel Robinson on the previous morning and an excellent way of doing so had now presented itself. The Colonel, not having seen Suleiman since he had been taken by the police, had no knowledge of what the Malayan had told the authorities. The Colonel must therefore walk warily, and Widgeon knew it, and intended to make the most of this knowledge. The fact that Suleiman had in fact disclosed nothing need not be

mentioned; in fact the opposite impression must be conveyed. At the same time Widgeon had no intention of antagonising the Colonel: more information would be forthcoming if he made things as easy as possible for him.

"Of course I quite realise," went on the Inspector, "that you have not thought it worth while to mention certain matters which you have regarded as irrelevant, and indeed they may still be so. On the other hand, with the *fuller information which I now possess*, it would perhaps be better for you to give me your version in its entirety and allow me to judge of its irrelevancy or otherwise."

"Well . . . I . . ." the Colonel hesitated. He appreciated the delicacy of his own position and began to weaken. Widgeon immediately followed up his advantage.

"I assure you it would be better," he said, "to give me your side of the story, keeping back nothing."

The Colonel nodded.

"I understand," he muttered. "Well, I'll be perfectly frank with you. You are quite right in thinking that I d'dn't speak about certain matters because they were and still are irrelevant to this case. To a certain extent I myself am in the dark. But Sulciman will no doubt explain, if he has not already done so. I must go back a long way, if you are to understand the whole story. As I told you, I have rather a particular fondness for young Jack Ransome, and when I heard that Vining was proposing to cut him out of his will I thought I might usefully intervene on the young man's behalf; so I went to see Vining. That was on Monday morning last. My interview with him was unsuccessful. On the following

morning, that is to say yesterday, I received an urgent message from Mrs. Bateman saying that Vining had actually taken the decision to cut Jack off, and had told the boy so. Now here is where I must go back a bit. Nearly thirty years ago, when I was a young man in my twenties, I was living at my father's house in the suburbs of Singapore. I knew Vining from my Cambridge days, and when I heard he was coming out that way, on some world tour or other that he was doing, I naturally invited him to stay with us, and he accepted the invitation. I had always known him to be rather an unusual sort of a fellow—very clever and all that, and particularly interested in antiquities; even in those early days he posed as, and no doubt was, a bit of an expert on the habits and customs of eastern peoples, on their folk-lore and their religions. At Cambridge he used to be a keen member of the Asiatic Society. But you mustn't think from this that Vining was just the ordinary sort of book-worm. He was certainly what they call in these days "an intellectual," but he was also very much the man of action. His exploits at Cambridge used to be the talk of the day. He did the maddest things. I daresay you may have heard of the occasion when the Mayor and town council of Cambridge all turned out to welcome an important Zulu potentate: he was met at the station and conducted in state to the Guildhall, where an imposing ceremony took place, followed by a magnificent banquet, to which all the big wigs came, including the Vice-Chancellor of the University. Then he was taken round the Colleges; the master of Trinity gave him tea, and

afterwards he was conducted back to the station, where a special train was waiting for him and a huge crowd had collected to see him off. He actually sent an autograph letter and a handsome gift to the Mayor, by way of thanking him for his hospitality. Well, it was all a hoax. The fellow wasn't a Zulu potentate at all, but to this day very few people know actually who he was. I'm one of the few people, because I happened to take a hand in organising the show. That potentate was Laurence Vining. He acted the part to perfection, and never once during the whole time did he show any sign of his nerve failing him. In fact, he didn't seem to have any nerves at all.

"That was only one of his exploits. There were countless others I could tell you about. But that one's enough to show you the sort of man he was. You'd only got to throw down a challenge to him, and provided it was sufficiently daring and worth while, he'd take it up at once, and see the thing through. In a way he didn't know what fear meant or shame for that matter. Anything like reverence was alien to his nature.

"Well, as I say, he came out to stay with us at our place in Singapore. He was immensely interested in his trip, and was for ever thirsting for information about the local tribes, their traditions, legends, superstitions and so forth. And anyone who knows anything about the Malay people knows that they provide very fruitful ground for the research student and antiquarian. To cut a long story short, it happened one evening that we were discussing the traditional attitude of the Malaysians

towards their Kings or Sultans: it's a very remarkable attitude. They carry the divine right theory to much greater lengths than we've ever carried it to in our western civilisation, even if you go back to Roman times. The Malayan Sultan is a god on earth, and his person is the holiest object which a Malayan can conceive of. Not only is the Sultan's person sacred but the sanctity of his body is believed to communicate itself to his Regalia, and to slay those who break the Royal Tattoos. In fact it is a well established belief in Malay that anyone who seriously offends the Royal Person, or who touches even for a moment or imitates *even with the Sultan's permission* the chief objects of the Regalia will be struck dead — *Kěna daulat*, as they call it.

“The Regalia usually consist among other things of two drums, which must never be beaten: silver trumpets, which must never be sounded: and the royal *kris* or dagger, which must never be handled. These objects were kept by the Sultan himself, and were carefully stored in a galvanised iron box or cupboard, which stood on wooden props about three feet from the ground, in the middle of the lawn at his Majesty's garden residence at Bandar Maharani. The weirdest stories were told about them. For example whenever ‘beads of perspiration’ stood on the silver trumpets, it was a sure sign that a member of the royal family was about to die. Or again, when a Chinaman who was engaged in rethatching the little roof which covered the Regalia, happened accidentally to tread on one of the wooden barrels containing one of the drums, he

shortly afterwards swelled up to an enormous size and died.

"All this talk interested Vining, but because he was a young man, the mere knowledge of these things was not enough for him : he wanted to *see for himself*, he wanted to look with his own eyes on the Regalia, and to handle the things which must not be handled. His interest was particularly aroused by the Royal *kris*. The description of it that one of the company gave that evening was certainly alluring. I shall never forget the scene, and the conversation that took place. It was quite dark, and we were all sitting in a covered-in veranda : the stars were magnificent, and the peace of the night was broken only now and again by the shrill note of a bird, rather like our corncrake. We had fallen into rather a serious mood, talking about all the legends and age long traditions : and a fellow named Benson, who was British adviser to the Sultan, was describing the beauty of the Royal *kris*. I can almost repeat his words now, they made such an impression on my mind—indeed on all our minds.

" 'A straight blade it has,' he said, 'of one piece, which fits spontaneously into the haft. The grooves, called *ritak mayat*, start from the base of the blade : the damask called *pamur janji* appears half-way up, and the damask *ahf* is there parallel with the edge, and where the damask ends, the steel is white. No ordinary metal is the steel : it is what was left over after making the bolt of the God's *Ka'abah* at Mecca. It had been forged by the son of God's prophet, Adam, smelted in the palms of his hand, fashioned with the end of his fingers, and coloured with the juice

of flowers in a Chinese furnace. Its deadly qualities came down to it from the sky, and if it is cleaned at the source of a river, the fish at the embouchure come floating up dead. It is the dagger *Hangin Cinga*, the King's Dagger, on which the solemn oath is sworn: *at His command it fights of itself*, and by a noise expresses an unwillingness to be sheathed and shews itself pleased when drawn.'

"We all remained silent for a while after he had spoken, and then the talk drifted into other channels. But Vining didn't join in the talk any more that evening. He had been immensely impressed by all he had heard and I could see that he was thinking hard.

"After everyone had gone and just he and I were left in the room, he told me that he wanted to see this dagger. At first I didn't take him seriously: he knew as well as I did that one has to respect local customs, and that you can't just go into places and see things, as you can in London museums. But I soon saw that he was serious, and that he meant to get at those regalia and particularly at the *kris*. I did everything I could to dissuade him. But he wouldn't listen. He wanted my help, I refused. He then said that he'd do it on his own.

"It was just about this time that he'd taken on Suleiman, who was then a boy of fourteen or fifteen. But what part Suleiman played in the affair of the Regalia I never knew. I rather suspect now that he played no part at all, and that Vining managed the whole thing on his own."

Colonel Robinson paused in his narrative and lighted a cigarette. Then he turned a little in his chair, and went on.

"A day or two after the conversation I've told you about, Vining announced that he was going up-country. No more had been said about the Regalia or the famous *kris*, and I hoped the matter had passed out of his mind. As it turned out I was wrong. He left Singapore taking only Suleiman with him, and went straight up to Bandar Maharani, where the Sultan had his garden residence. I don't know the details of what took place up there, but in less than a week he had returned to Singapore, and you can imagine my astonishment and alarm, when one evening when Vining and I were alone, he casually produced the royal *kris* and shewed it to me! *He had actually stolen it* from the Sultan's garden and no one was as yet any the wiser. I spoke just now of my alarm: as a matter of fact I was horrified at what he had done. I knew that if it were once known who the thief was his life would not be worth a snap of the fingers. For these Malayan fellows would have no mercy, and what was more they had interminable memories. Even if the thief wasn't discovered straight away they'd never forget the deadly insult offered to their Sultan and if at any time in the future the identity of the thief became known, no matter who he was or *where he might be*, they'd track him down and there would be an end of him.

"(Of course the theft was bound to be discovered almost immediately, and I used every form of persuasion I could think of to get Vining to leave the country. but he refused to budge. He said he wanted to stay and see the fun! Meanwhile he had a small canoe made, with a false bottom: and in this he hid the *kris*.

"Then the storm burst. I daresay you may have heard its reverberations in the Press at home. The whole place seethed with excitement: special native decrees were issued, special prayers were offered in all the temples, the military were called out to keep the mob from rioting. In fact the place became almost uninhabitable. And through it all Vining remained.

"Well, I needn't trouble you with the rest of the details. In spite of all the efforts that were made, the thief was not discovered, and he remains undiscovered to this day. Eventually Vining brought the *kris* home, and kept it locked up in a corner cupboard in his study! Even that was a mad thing to do, for I think he realised as well as I did that it would be the worse for him if it ever got about that he was in possession of the famous Bandar *kris*. Still, the passion of the collector was always very great in him, and I know that he must have regarded it as the most valuable and remarkable thing in his whole collection: and it has remained in that cupboard all those years, apparently until yesterday, when it came out and took its terrible revenge. So far as I know, no one besides myself has even been let into the secret."

The Colonel took several puffs at his cigarette before resuming.

"That's the story of the Bandar *kris*. And now I come back to what took place yesterday. As I said, I had a message in the morning from Mrs. Bateman. I wanted to do as much as I could for Jack: my interview with Vining had proved unsuccessful, and sooner than just stand by and see Jack's chances wrecked, I . . . well I confess I

thought I'd try to bring what pressure I could to make Vining see reason. There was not a moment to lose. I sent at once for Suleiman. As soon as he arrived, I assumed a very stern and impressive air. I asked him if he remembered the theft of the Bandar *kris*. That startled him. Being a Malayan he had taken the matter very much to heart at the time and though I firmly believe (though I do not know for certain) that he did not have a hand in the theft itself, yet I can scarcely think that he has remained in ignorance all these years of the whereabouts of that *kris*. No, I do not think it was ignorance, but *fear*, amounting in his case to a deadly terror, that has kept his mouth shut.

" Well, I played on his feelings and on his fear, in order to gain my purpose. My plan was that Suleiman should get hold of the *kris* and bring it to me, and that I, being in possession of it, should inform Vining that unless he altered his decision about Jack, I should publish to the world the fact that he, Vining, had stolen the famous Bandar *kris*. It would not have been difficult to work up a newspaper stunt about such a thing. The theft had had considerable Press publicity at the time, and it would startle the public mind to know that the thief—discovered after all these years—was one of its well-known public men. I don't try to defend my proposed action ; I know it was a . . . well, an immoral sort of thing to do. If you like, it was a cad's trick. But I had my reasons. I hoped that my possession of the famous *kris* would be sufficient, and that the mere threat of publicity would have caused Vining to change his mind. Perhaps that was an

optimistic view. Anyway I wanted to get hold of the *kris* as a first step. Then I would see. I succeeded easily enough in impressing Suleiman. I told him that the whereabouts of the Sultan's *kris*, which had lain hid all these years in Vining's study, had recently been revealed and that the avengers of the theft were at hand : I said that they knew of his presence with Vining when the theft had been committed, and that he—as well as Vining—was marked down for a terrible vengeance. Suleiman is a simple-minded fellow, and swallowed the story : all the same it gave him bad indigestion ; he swore that he was innocent and begged me to protect him. This was exactly the opportunity for which I was waiting. I told him what a dangerous and difficult task it would be for me to shield him, and that in all probability the only sure way he could save himself from the wrath of the Avengers would be for him to kill Vining : that act would, in some measure at any rate, appease Vining's enemies and would doubtless redound to his (Suleiman's) credit . on the other hand it would be awkward for him, as far as the English law was concerned, if he was discovered. That side of it he readily understood ! As a compromise, therefore, we agreed that he would take the first opportunity of getting hold of the *kris*, and would bring it straight to me. I told him that I would then be able to dispose of it, and that I would keep him out of any trouble.

“ I could see that by the time I had finished talking to him he was almost overcome with the fear of what might happen to him if once the *kris* was discovered in his master's house. And he departed full of this fear, and

full of determination also to carry my instructions through."

There was another pause in the Colonel's narrative. Then he became very solemn. He leant forward and spoke slowly :

" Before I finish, Inspector, I just want to add this : my action may not have been a very laudable one in itself, but it was taken solely in the interests of someone else, in the interests I mean of Jack Ransome. And I swear to you solemnly that Sulciman had no other mandate from me than to bring me the *kris* : he had no mandate from me to kill Vining. That is the truth. What happened to him after he left me, I do not know, nor have I any idea why he disappeared. Those matters he can doubtless explain himself. But I have told you my side of the story and I have told you the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

The Colonel leant back in his chair, and for some moments neither of the two men spoke. Then Widgeon broke the silence.

" Before we have Sulciman in," he said, " there is just one question I would like to ask you. You say you did all this solely in the interests of Captain Ransome. To go to such lengths you must have—well, a peculiar affection for him."

" I have," replied the Colonel.

" But what is he to you ? "

The Colonel didn't answer for a moment. Then he said quite simply :

" He is my son."

§ XIII

The Colonel lit another cigarette.

"It's getting a bit late," he observed.

The little hand of the official clock in Widgeon's room pointed to eleven.

"We work all hours of the day and night here," replied Widgeon. "I sleep here sometimes. . . . So young Jack Ransome's your son, eh? I should like to hear more about that."

"Well, it won't take long to tell you. We're speaking within the four walls of this room, Inspector?"

Widgeon nodded.

"Before you start," he said, "have you any knowledge of his present whereabouts?"

"None," replied the Colonel solemnly. "I have no idea at all where he is or why he has not shown up. But I'll swear to this—that he's absolutely innocent of this crime, if crime it be. He'd be incapable of such a thing, Inspector!"

"I hope so sincerely," responded Widgeon cautiously.

The Colonel resumed.

"It all happened years ago now," he said in a somewhat monotonous voice, "and I've tried to forget. No use crying over spilt milk. When I told you that I was living at my father's house in Singapore, I didn't tell you that my young wife was out there with me as well. Perhaps I oughtn't to have taken her there. She had lived in London all her life, and loved everything that

London had to offer her—society, theatres, books, music, the opera—all the things that go to make up a civilised life. Then she married me and I took her out East almost immediately. What a change for her! There was society of a kind in Singapore, but not the free and easy intelligent sort that she'd been accustomed to. It was stiff and uninteresting. But such as it was, she stood it for a year. I had still another two years out there before I could take her home, and I saw how bored she was getting. What could I do? It worried me no end . . . then her baby came, and I thought at any rate that that would give her an interest in life. She was desperately ill having it. It was touch and go, but she just managed to pull through. At first the infant occupied all her time, and she adored looking after it. 'Then somehow or other (I'm covering the ground quickly, Inspector: compressing months into minutes as it were) the old boredom began to creep back. I could see it coming, but was powerless to prevent it. I don't know much about women; always steered clear of them as much as I could. I s'pose it is not much fun messing about with a baby all day long even if it's your own. Anyway you'd want a change occasionally and that's just what Dorothy couldn't get. Day in and day out with the baby. You can imagine what life must have been like in a God-forsaken place like Singapore. I was getting devilish worried, I tell you.

"Then Vining came. I was delighted. I insisted that he should come and stay with us. Dorothy had never met him: he was somebody new and you can imagine how we longed for new faces. He had an atmosphere of his

own—an atmosphere of intelligence, humour and wit: he could talk brilliantly when he wanted to; he had read all the latest books, knew almost everything worth knowing, and could play any instrument from the organ to the ukelele. In fact he was a godsend to the dull and rather suburban life that went on in our household. I never thought he'd stand it, and was at once surprised and delighted when he stayed on week after week. I couldn't think what there was to attract him. Naturally he and Dorothy saw a great deal of one another. I had to work and they were left alone every day. Used to go riding together, and all that.

“ Well, the inevitable happened. It was shortly after the Regalia affair. I came home as usual one evening and found a note waiting for me from Dorothy. She'd gone off with Vining and taken the baby with her. . . . I remember going up to my father's room, with the note crumpled up in my hand. He was an invalid and had taken to his bed for some weeks past. He asked where the other two were, and said that Dorothy hadn't read to him, as usual, that afternoon. I hadn't the heart to tell him then. I invented some tale or other and kept it up as best I could for over a week. Then the old man got suspicious, and of course the whole thing came out as it was bound to. It broke his heart. He lingered on, a hopeless invalid, for about ten weeks. You can imagine what that period must have been like for me. Then my father died. I couldn't stick being out there on my own, with all the associations of the place haunting me. My firm were very good and all that. They offered me another

job in China. But I wanted to get clean away from everything associated with Dorothy—even from the firm I was working with when she was with me. I heard that there was a war on in South Africa, so I booked my passage home in order to join up. I got a ship from Rangoon.

“Then a strange thing happened. The first port of call on the way home was Colombo. We got there early one morning and were due to leave the same evening. The new passengers came on in the afternoon. I had just had my tea and was strolling on the deck when I came face to face with Vining. Imagine my feelings. Here was I desperately anxious to get away from everything connected with my past life—everything connected with Dorothy and even the baby. I never cared for babies much. And then this happens. On a boat, mark you, where the only way of getting free was to jump overboard. I don’t quite know what happened. I know I had just one impulse, and that was to knock him as hard and clean as I could between the eyes. But I never did it. Somehow or other he managed to convey to me that Dorothy was dead. She had died of pneumonia two weeks before. That fact didn’t exactly bring us together; but I felt I could just tolerate his presence on board, and that was about all. The child he had with him, in charge of my ayah.

“What was I to do? I wanted to cut myself from all that had gone before, even from the child . . . and yet . . . it was my child, you know. It seemed hard. I decided to tackle Vining. After our first meeting we had not spoken, and had done our best to avoid one another—though with not much success. I awaited my opportunity.

It came soon enough, one evening after dinner. He was alone on deck. I approached him, and I saw his features stiffen : he probably thought I was going to strike him. I asked him what he proposed to do with the boy. He said that he was interested in him and was going to adopt him. I observed that he was my son. He admitted that right enough, but said it had been Dorothy's dying wish that the boy should never be returned to me, and that consequently he, Vining, was not intending to hand him over. I don't think I've ever been so cruelly hit in my life. I was too upset to say anything, and I think Vining was touched, in his queer way, at my distress. He said he would always be kind to the lad and that I might see him occasionally, if I wanted to. Just think of that : the man had stolen my wife, had let her die, probably through his gross negligence and selfishness, and was now informing me that he would permit me to see my own son occasionally ! . . . However, I saw the position was hopeless and I had to make the best of it. All of a sudden I became desperately anxious not to lose touch with the boy : I wanted to watch him grow up and to follow his career. I know the law might have helped me ; but somehow I hadn't the heart—or perhaps the cash—to face all that a law-suit would have entailed. Towards the end of the voyage I had an idea. I might keep in touch through the child's nurse ! It would be better than nothing. I told Vining that I knew of a good nurse for the boy. . . . At first he suspected my intentions. I then pointed out to him that if the truth were to get about, things might be unpleasant for him. He saw the

force of this, and on my promising to keep quiet about my relation with the child, he undertook to get rid of the ayah and to engage a nurse of my choice as soon as we got back to England. So then we landed. I wired to a friend of mine, who was a sort of village Squire, and asked him to choose a good, sensible girl to look after the baby of a widowed friend. He chose the future Mrs. Bateman. I arranged to meet her at the station, when she came up to London, and I told her to be sure and let me know if ever there was any trouble coming Jack's way. I wrapped it up a bit, of course, but I made it pretty plain that I was considerably interested in the child. . . . Vining gave him the name of Ransome. I didn't mind much : it was a better name than Vining !

" You can guess the rest. I didn't see much of Vining at any time after that, thank God ! but I've seen a good bit of Jack on and off, when I've been in England. Mrs. Bateman's been a brick all through. Suleiman I hardly ever saw : but when I did he had a very healthy respect for me. That's the outline of the whole story."

The Colonel ceased. On the whole Life had not treated him too kindly, but he had not broken faith. He had faced up to things like a man, in the almost instinctive belief that life was worth living, though sometimes he had his doubts.

Widgeon, who had listened to the story in silence, felt no doubt at all in his mind that it was all true and that the Colonel was not keeping anything back. It remained to see what Suleiman himself could add to it.

The Malayan was accordingly sent for, Colonel Robinson remaining in the room at Widgeon's request.

Suleiman certainly looked cleaner, though it was obvious that he was still very tired and overwrought. He sat down in the chair beside Widgeon's desk.

"Colonel Robinson has been telling me of his talk with you yesterday, when you went to his house," began the Inspector, speaking slowly and distinctly. "You understand me?"

Suleiman nodded, and threw a frightened glance at the Colonel.

"You left Colonel Robinson's house at about a quarter past three I think. Is that correct?"

Suleiman nodded again.

"Now I want you to tell me where you went and what you did," said Widgeon, "after leaving Colonel Robinson's house."

Suleiman looked from one man to the other, obviously uncertain of his ground.

The Colonel reassured him:

"Don't be afraid, Suleiman," he said. "We are your friends. I have explained fully to Inspector Widgeon here the part I have played. I told him that I asked you to get the Sultan's *kris* from Mr. Vining. Just tell us what you did, and why you ran away . . . for I suppose you did run away?"

These words were encouraging for Suleiman. He had been wanting to get the whole business off his chest for the past twenty-four hours, but up to now he had been afraid to speak. Now he seized his opportunity, and the words poured out of his mouth in such volume that it was not easy for the other two to understand him at first. His

command of the English language was not great at the best of times : he could be fluent, but his words were never very distinct. In his present nervous condition, the indistinct words seemed to tumble over one another, and several times Widgeon had to ask the excited Easterner to pause for breath before going on.

The gist of Suleiman's story, in a few words, was that on leaving Colonel Robinson's house, he had walked along Knightsbridge as far as Hyde Park Tube Station. During his walk he had naturally been thinking of what Colonel Robinson had said to him, and turning over in his mind the mission he was to perform. He had been thoroughly frightened by the Colonel and his nerves were in a pretty jumpy state. As he was nearing the station he had suddenly caught sight of his master in the distance. It was a shock to him. He hardly had time to reason why it was a shock. His one thought was to avoid the necessity of awkward explanations. Being just in front of the station when he saw Vining, he rushed to the nearest hiding-place he could see. It was the telephone box in the *exit* passage of the station. There he remained for about five minutes. Then he emerged, and took a bus to Leicester Square, and thence the tube to Hampstead. On reaching home, he went straight to Vining's study. He found that the cupboard containing the famous *kris* was locked. With the aid of a penknife he managed to open it, only to find, in classic phrase (though it was not Suleiman's), that the cupboard was bare. The Bandar *kris* had gone.

Suleiman then retired to his room, not knowing what

to do. It was then half-past four. At six o'clock the evening paper was delivered at the house, containing the announcement of Vining's death, and the description of the curiously worked dagger.

There could be no doubt about it. The Great Avengers had started on their work. Vining had been laid low. *He, Suleiman, would be the next victim!* Panic seized him. Without a moment's thought or hesitation, he decided to abscond. Discarding his native dress, he threw himself into less conspicuous clothing and fled from the house. His departure was so sudden, so stealthy and so quiet that it was unnoticed by the other servants.

Suleiman then described how he had wandered about the previous night in the vicinity of the river, and how ultimately he had come across an unoccupied wooden shed in which he had spent the night. Then followed a day of more wandering, a terrible day spent in avoiding — what? Suleiman himself hardly knew. He felt that some terrible fate was hanging over him, and would surely overtake him if once he emerged: as long as he remained "lost to the world" he was safe: but once he was recognised, then it would be all up. And so he had spent a day of agony. The appearance of his photograph in all the papers had seemed to him in some vague way all part of the plot of which he was to be the victim. His mind was too muddled and his fibre too strained for him to reason about the situation in a logical way. His master had been sought out and killed: in the same way he would be sought out and killed. That was all he was capable of realising. That had been his all-pervading

thought during the whole of that terrible day. In the end his nerves had played him false. He had been trapped as it were, into giving himself up, and there he was.

As there had been no doubting the Colonel's sincerity, so, Widgeon felt, there was no doubting this wretched man's sincerity. He was *even still* under the impression that the terrible Avenger would have him, and when the time came to leave Scotland Yard, he would only do so on the condition that he could go home with the Colonel and sleep at his house.

After their departure, Widgeon paced up and down his room for some moments, whistling softly to himself. His colleagues always said that when Widgeon whistled softly things were nearing a conclusion.

Suddenly the telephone bell rang. Widgeon picked up the receiver.

"Hullo . . . ?"

"Hullo," said a voice the other end. "Is that Inspector Widgeon?"

"Yes."

"Jack Ransome speaking, Inspector."

§ XIV

Pamela Jackson was tired out when she reached home after her unfortunate meeting with Inspector Widgeon near Endell Street. She lived in a small house in Hampstead with her mother, of whom she was very fond. The

last two days had been a very trying time for them both. The shock of Vining's death had been bad enough : but the subsequent disappearance of Jack Ransome had naturally given rise to horrid suspicions which they were only too anxious to dispel. But it was impossible to dispel them so long as Jack lay hid. If only he would come back ! Pamela's mother was genuinely fond of the young man, and though she was much too wise to mention it, she secretly hoped that he and Pamela would make a match.

Pamela had not thought it necessary to tell her mother that she had lunched with Jack on the previous day, still less that he had proposed to her and that she had declined. Her mother's suspicions about Jack were therefore vague and formless. Pamela, on the other hand, had ideas of her own, one of which was that Jack was entirely innocent of any connection with her late employer's death : and to this idea she clung and would continue to cling in spite of his disappearance, however long it might last.

The two women spent a gloomy evening together, and retired early to bed. Pamela's nerves were too much on edge for anything but the most fitful sleep to overtake her. She lay tossing on her bed, restless and anxious. Her room seemed stuffy. She got up and stood by the open window. Outside the air was heavy and she could hear the roll of distant thunder from some far away storm. She lit a cigarette, blowing the first puff of smoke out into the night air, to mingle with the scent of flowers that grew in the garden beneath. Where was Jack ? If only she could send a message to him ! But that was impossible. . . .

Besides she^{*} was not particularly lucky in delivering messages ! But surely *he* could send word. . . . She thought of their last interview together ; it seemed ages ago now, and yet it was only on the previous day. She had not been very nice to him, it was true : but then how could she know all that was going to happen ? Poor Jack ! In spite of her refusal, she was very fond of him. In fact she had never quite realised until she had lost him, how very much she had need of him. She sighed for his return.

The clock in the clock-tower struck eleven. The night was beautiful and calm. Even the distant thunder had ceased, and there was not a sound, save the occasional hoot of an owl. Pamela tossed her cigarette out of the window and turned towards her bed. Suddenly she stopped and listened. Had she heard a rustle in the garden or was it the wind ? She turned and looked out of the window again. Yes,^{*} there was a definite sound ; it came from the ivy on the garden wall. . . . Pamela did not move. In ordinary circumstances she was not easily frightened, and even in her present state of nerves, she was not disposed to cry out before she was hurt. She watched the place where the noise seemed to come from. The moon was not full, but there was enough light to distinguish the outline of things. All of a sudden the figure of a man jumped down into the garden, and was lost to sight in the darkness of the shadows. Pamela scarcely dared breathe for excitement. She remembered vaguely that there was a police whistle in some drawer or other, but where exactly she did not know. As she stood wondering what was going to happen next she was startled and temporarily

blinded by a shower of gravel that hit her full in the face, and fell in the room about her. As soon as she had recovered herself, she leant out of the window.

"Pamela!" cried a voice softly from below.

She could hardly believe her ears. Could it *really* be—

"Pamela," came the voice again. "It's me—Jack."

"Jack!" echoed the girl in a frightened tone.

"Come down and let me in."

Swiftly catching up a wrap and flinging it about her shoulders, she ran downstairs, and along the passage into the back drawing-room. Softly she unlocked the French windows which opened on to the garden, and Jack Ransome entered the room.

"Wait till I turn on the light," exclaimed Pamela.

"Draw the curtains first!" murmured Jack.

With the curtains drawn and the light switched on, the two surveyed each other. Pamela with her pale frightened face and her dainty wrap looked too beautiful for words, and for some moments Jack gazed at her in silence, not daring to break the spell that she had wrought upon him. He, on the other hand, presented a very different appearance. His face was swarthy with two days beard upon it, his clothes were torn and grungy, and his hands usually so clean and delicate—were bruised and cut about. A greater contrast between two people could scarcely be imagined.

Pamela was the first to break the silence.

"My dear, I'm glad to see you," she said simply.

"Don't explain, unless you want to."

"Do you think I'm a murderer?" asked Jack suddenly. There was a note of challenge in his voice.

"No," answered Pamela quietly, "I do not. But even if you were ——" she paused.

"Even if I were, what then?" persisted Jack.

"I should not be frightened of you!" she smiled. This was not quite what she had meant to say, and perhaps Jack knew it, for she had hardly finished speaking, when he caught her in his arms and kissed her long and passionately. At length he released her, panting.

"My God," he muttered, "what have I done!"

"Well, you've made several dirty marks on my wrap, and nearly scraped the skin off my face!"

Pamela tried to hide her confusion in banalities.

"Do you forgive me?" asked Jack.

"Forgive you?"

"For . . . for kissing you like that. I've been through hell . . . since yesterday."

She took his hand gently.

"Poor old thing," she said softly. "Sit down and tell me all about it."

"Before I do that," answered Jack, not moving, "am I forgiven?"

"Of course you're forgiven, my. . . ."

"My love!" he exclaimed.

"My love," she whispered.

And again they were folded in one another's arms, but this time, over and above the blinding passion of the first embrace, there was a deep, though as yet undeveloped knowledge of an abiding love.

How long their embrace lasted neither could have said. Time didn't matter. Nothing mattered, except their love for each other. That was the only thing they were aware of.

At length Jack found himself seated in a chair with Pamela kneeling at his feet.

"Poor tired thing," she was saying. Her voice sounded far away to Jack, who in truth was on the verge of physical exhaustion. She arose and ran to another room where her mother kept a bottle of brandy, "purely for medicinal purposes." The drink revived him.

"I had to come in this way," he explained, "because your house is being watched from the front. What's been happening?"

Briefly she told him what she knew of the investigations that had been going on during the past two days, and how desperately anxious everyone had been to know where he had got to. He laughed when she told him of her interview with Widgeon, and how careful she had been to say nothing of his angry mood when he had left her after lunch on the previous day.

"I suppose it would have looked terribly suspicious," he admitted. "And yet the explanation's absurdly simple. When I left you, I was pretty fed up as you can imagine. I wandered back to the hospital and thought things over. There I was, practically penniless, a failure in my profession, and apparently a failure in love. Because you see, I thought you and my uncle. . . ."

Pamela shuddered.

"Well, I didn't know -and, by the way, you owe me an explanation. Anyway I made up my mind to chuck

everything up and go to sea. It was a mad decision : but I was feeling so absolutely hopeless about everything that I simply couldn't go on as I was. I left the hospital and went away down to the East End, to the docks. I happened to know a fellow down that way, who keeps a pub where a lot of the small-craft skippers usually assemble. I got down there about six o'clock, and as luck would have it, I was taken on by the skipper of one of the tramps that was sailing last night. The skipper was a decent sort of a chap : he simply took me at my word and asked no questions. I spent the rest of the evening helping to get the last cargo on board, and at ten o'clock we weighed anchor. I spent half the night on deck, and the other half in the fore'ard hatch. I was up devilishly early, scrubbing the decks ! I hadn't got exactly the right clothes for the job, but still ! One way and another I was kept pretty busy all day. It was a local tramp, and we reached our first port of call in the early evening—some God-forsaken place on the Essex Coast. When we put in I happened to see some newspaper placards with Vining's death announced.

"Of course, you could have knocked me over. I bought a paper and the first thing I saw was my own photograph ! . . . Well, I left that ship and disguising myself as best I could I travelled back to London by a train that stopped at every station on the way . . . and here I am."

"But how on earth," asked Pamela, "can they ever have thought that you had anything to do with your uncle's death ?"

Jack shrugged his shoulders,

"Are you glad I came here?" he asked

"Why did you, Jack?"

"I guessed somchow. . . . Tell me, why has this happened? Is it just because Vining's gone?"

"You silly boy," cried Pamela. Then she became serious. "I think Mr. Vining wanted me to be fond of him: but I couldn't. And just lately he hasn't liked it a bit. I felt too that he hated our being together, you and me, I mean. He was jealous of you, Jack: and I knew that if you married me you would be penniless; it would have meant that I would be robbing you, in a sense, of your fortune . . . and I simply couldn't bear to be doing that. It seemed so unfair to you."

Jack began to understand this girl's devotion to him. But before he could answer, Pamela had risen.

"Hadn't you better telephone at once to Inspector Widgeon at Scotland Yard?" she suggested.

§ xv

On the following morning Jack Ransome came to Scotland Yard at Widgeon's request. The inspector did not seem in the least surprised at the explanation of his absence, and even went so far as to admit that he had acted hastily in setting up the hue and cry.

"I didn't realise things then," said Widgeon, "as I realise them now."

"Have you caught the murderer then?" asked Jack.

Widgeon shook his head, and smiled rather sadly.

"I am afraid I shall never catch him," he said.

There was a pause.

"By the way," went on Widgeon, producing the dagger sheath he had found in Jack's bedroom at the hospital, "I suppose you've never seen this before?"

Jack examined it and shook his head.

"I thought as much," said Widgeon gloomily. "It was discovered under the mattress of your bed at the hospital. It is the sheath belonging to the dagger which stabbed your uncle."

Jack gave a whistle of surprise.

"Someone trying to incriminate me, eh?"

"I'm not sure about that," replied Widgeon. "I rather think it was partly an accident. It was too clumsy to be anything else."

Jack expressed his mystification.

"I think I'll not say any more just at present, Captain Ransome," said the inspector, "beyond wishing you the very best of luck."

The two shook hands, and Jack took his departure.

Widgeon returned to his desk, and took up again the morning paper which he had been reading. It was opened at the main news page. In the first column there was a description of a terrible railway accident that had occurred on the Paris-Marseilles line on the previous day. There were many killed, including several British: among the latter appeared the names of Thomas Plunkett and Lillian Plunkett. A note in the paper drew attention to the fact that these two were the son and daughter of the recently executed John Plunkett, whose conviction had

been brought about largely owing to the efforts of the late Mr. Laurence Vining. Portraits of Tom and Lil appeared on another page. Widgeon examined these portraits carefully.

"It isn't the face that's so important," he reflected to himself, "as the figure."

Then he leant back in his chair and thought. Five minutes later he was on his way to Hyde Park Tube Station in a police car. The part of the station that interested him this time was not the lift, but the great spiral stairway. He made a thorough examination of it, and concentrated particularly on the last half-dozen steps at the bottom.

"Has this stairway been cleaned lately?" he asked a tube official who was with him.

"Yes, sir," replied the man. "Cleaned yesterday morning."

Widgeon nodded, and then slowly climbed the spiral stairway, until he reached the landing, just below the upper station. Here again he made a thorough examination, apparently without result. Then he made his way round to St. George's Hospital. He interviewed again the servant girl whom he had seen the previous day when he was in Jack's room with Archie Ferrand.

"Cast your mind back to Tuesday afternoon," he said to the girl. "Did you notice anyone going up to Mr. Ransome's room between 3.30 and 4.0?"

"No, sir. I was busy getting the tea things ready then."

"Was there anybody else on duty here on that afternoon?"

"No, sir? Only me. The other two girls didn't get back till about 6.0."

Widgeon made similar enquiries throughout the hospital, but no one had seen or known of anybody who had gone to Jack's room that afternoon. The inspector then put a telephone call through to Vining's house at Hampstead and spent about a quarter of an hour over the call. He then drove back to Scotland Yard. On reaching his room he found Dr. Willing waiting for him.

"Good morning, Inspector," said Willing. "I hope I'm not in the way."

"Not in the least," replied Widgeon. "Very glad indeed to see you here."

"Are we any nearer a solution?" asked the doctor. "Have you thought over my theory? What does Suleiman say?"

"Suleiman didn't do this thing," replied Widgeon solemnly.

"You seem very sure about it," observed the doctor.

"I am." There was an ominous note in the inspector's tone.

Dr. Willing looked up quickly.

"You don't mean," he said, "that you've found . . .?"

"I'm rather troubled about the mackintosh that Mr. Vining had with him."

"How's that?" enquired the doctor.

"He didn't take it with him when he left home," observed Widgeon drily.

There was a silence.

"Also, when a man travels by the tube, he presumably

takes a ticket. I've searched high and low for Mr. Vining's ticket. But I haven't found it. I admit it might have got swept up or destroyed. Anyway it's not very important."

"You're being very mysterious, Inspector. For God's sake, if you know the man who did this murder, tell me his name!"

"The man who did this murder was a master of ingenuity. In one sense he ran enormous risks. In another sense he ran no risk at all. What I am unable to fathom is the motive."

"But his name! Do you know his name?" asked the doctor very excitedly.

"I know the man who did this murder, but he is safe: for I have not now, nor shall I ever have, any shred of evidence against him."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the doctor. "When did you first suspect the culprit?"

"I was completely in the dark, until Beacham gave me his final evidence. That set me thinking on entirely new lines. Even then things were still a bit foggy: Ransome's appearance and his story cleared away a little of the fog - because, before I had an opportunity of interviewing him myself, I still had my suspicions about him: I don't know if you've noticed that the approach from his room at St. George's Hospital to the back of the tube station, doesn't present any great difficulty for an agile man."

"I didn't know that," interjected the doctor.

"His story however convinced me that I was on the wrong lines there. I cast about trying to think of another person who might possibly fill the bill. Then I came across this

train accident in France. 'Then in a flash the thing became obvious to me . . .'

"And yet you can make no arrest?" asked the doctor.

"And yet, I can make no arrest. This is one of those few cases—there have been others, but not many—in which we know who did the thing, and yet *through lack of evidence* nothing can be done."

The doctor nodded solemnly.

"Well," he said at length, "you mustn't let me detain you, Inspector."

"No," replied Widgeon heavily. "And you've seen to it, Doctor, that I *can't* detain you!"

And with that the doctor left the room.

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

HAD this been an ordinary detective story, and I had been the author of fiction, I suppose I should have had to make either Widgeon successful in arresting the criminal or else the criminal successful in committing suicide before he could be arrested. Unfortunately, or fortunately, neither of these things happened. As Widgeon himself explained to me, the process of elimination is not sufficient to bring about a conviction under English law. Circumstantial evidence must be corroborated beyond doubt. And this is what the authorities never succeeded in doing.

It is now nearly two years since Inspector Widgeon and Dr. Willing had their last interview together. So far as the police and the public are concerned the matter still rests as it rested then. No arrest was ever made, and the "Lost Case" still appears in Scotland Yard's list of unsolved mysteries.

As everyone knows, an echo of the case sounded throughout the Press when Dr. Willing himself passed away some six months ago. In his will he appointed me as sole executor, and certain papers of his of a highly confidential character came into my possession.

The will forbade me to disclose the nature of these

papers before the death of Dr. Willing's only near relative, to wit his sister Martha. Now, however, that the lady has recently followed her brother into the unknown, I am at liberty to publish such of Dr. Willing's papers as I choose. Undoubtedly the most interesting and illuminating of them all is his private diary—relevant excerpts from which (relevant, that is, to the Lift Case) appear in the following pages. I have gone to some trouble in deciding which parts of the diary I should omit from publication: it is a long document dating from nearly forty years ago, and would make a volume in itself. I have started from the days of his early acquaintance with Vining, and have given short extracts which show the character of the relationship between the two young men. The middle period I have filled, not with actual quotation from the diary, but with a summary of my own based upon a careful reading of the diary. The final entries are given in full.

To some it may seem that I am committing a breach of faith and friendship in giving these papers to the public. I naturally do not share that view. I hold that the events dealt with in this diary have what may be called a socio-psychological importance. That in itself should be enough to justify their publication, as matters of purely objective interest. Quite apart from this consideration, however, the public is entitled, in my view, to have revealed to it the solution of a mystery which it has long sought to unravel and which, so long as it remains a mystery, cannot but serve to heighten the glamour attaching to the crime itself as well as to the unknown criminal

or criminals. This glamorous attitude towards crime is certainly to be deplored. It may be argued, of course, that where the criminal is identified, the glamour, instead of floating-round vaguely in the air, will be centred on him. I think, however, that after this diary has been read, few will be found to envy the man whose success in evading the police must have weighed light in the balance, as against the burden of his stunted, jaundiced and miserable mentality – a burden which never left him and which cast a foul gloom over the whole of the thing he called his life.

I make then no apology for the publication of this diary, and without another word, I draw the curtain aside and retire.

PART IV

THE DIARY

CAMBRIDGE, 1901.

Oct. 17. People surround me on all sides. Yet how much alone I am! Why don't they let me take my place among them, instead of watching me to trip me up? "Mine enemies surround me on every side. . . ."

Oct. 19. I read a paper this evening before the Dilettanti on "Poisons." Frankel said it was the best paper we had had this term. How I wish that had been true! Why do they say these things? Do they think I like these compliments? Vining told me afterwards that he didn't know I'd "got such a lot in my little head" and that I was quite a dangerous fellow. . . . Why should he be so sarcastic about my work? I taxed him with it and he laughed and said I was fishing. And that between friends! Must we always be *nuancés* and never direct? He says I am too proud as it is. If he only knew! What does anybody know about me? Do they *all* think I am proud? Here is the thing in a nutshell: to be humble is a deadly sin. I mean it is *démode* in Christian England—which is the same thing. First come the "natural" prides—pride of race and pride of stock: these are the great prides because they are effortless: they are born with us or not. If they are not then we must acquire others—pride of wealth, pride of fame, pride of learning. But these are lesser prides, because we must work for them: and they are noisier than the great prides, they are more talked about. This is how I see it: I

myself have neither of the great prides: I am striving for the lesser ones, *but I shall never reach them.*

Oct. 20. "I am small and of no reputation." And yet I am no fool! I want to "cut ice" more than anything else in the world. My opinion should be valued, because of my knowledge. I would like people to say "B.W. says . . . and *he* ought to know!" But I *can never achieve* this position, because the hands of all men are against me. There is a dead set at me. *I know it.*

1902.

June 2. Vining is brilliant. He has a fine mind. But he has learnt a lot from me! He doesn't know how much he has learnt from me. He uses me to thrust at: but I give him more than he gives me. All men think well of him "When all men speak well of thee . . ." Let V. beware He will be great: but I, in my way, will be greater! Already my judgment is better than his. He has no *decency*, no feeling, no restraint. I think he is cruel. But he commands: he is a man among men. Yet he has need of me. This is good.

Vining's exam. finished to-day. The result will be out in a week. He is perfectly confident. I know he will pass high. *Would that he might fail miserably!* I, whom he calls his friend, say that! I hope he fails! He will lean the heavier on me.

June 5. Let me be quite frank. Vining is the dominant influence of my life. Why have I not realised this before? For the moment he has achieved a complete victory over me. . . . I am tired and can write no more to-night.

August 15. I have been ill and have not looked at my diary since the last entry. Vining is coming to stay with me to-morrow. He passed his exam.—first in the first class. . . .

I feel perfectly useless now. I wonder he looks at me at all. Perhaps I am misjudging him. . . . But I have known him too long. What brings him here is *pity*—almost contempt. I shall look into his face and know that in his heart he despises me ! I shall not care much, because I have no strength.

These few entries are sufficient to show, in the first place Willing's general state of mind, and in the second place the sort of relationship that was growing up between the two young men in the early years, just as they were both ending their 'Varsity careers. Ben Willing started at a disadvantage even before he came under Vining's powerful influence. He was suffering from what, in the language of modern psychology, is called an "inferiority complex." He had the feeling that he was in some way below the average standard of his fellow men. For some time the diary goes on to speak—almost daily—of this feeling. Sometimes it is with special reference to Vining, who is described as "looming over the whole horizon," "never releasing me from the spell of his influence," "directing my will," etc.: at other times, more particularly during Vining's absence on his two years' world tour, the feeling is described in general terms with no particular reference to anyone: Willing speaks of experiencing "immense discouragement," "spiritual tiredness"; he talks of "My waning spirit," "my

pitiable nature." All the time it is clear that he is struggling desperately hard with himself: he wants beyond everything to keep his end up. And yet nothing seems to be able to free him from the feeling that "all men are against me." He winces spiritually, every time he meets his fellow creatures. Even consciousness of this fact does not set him free.

When Vining comes to live near him, his mental life seems to become completely absorbed by his friend—for he is still Vining's friend, it is true that there are times when he wishes Vining ill, when he wishes that some calamity or shock may overtake him; but this is only in order that he (Willing) may be of some real use; in order that—in Willing's own words—"Vining may lean more heavily upon me." This is, admittedly, a selfish form of friendship, but it is not necessarily abnormal.

There is, however, a more curious point about Willing's attitude to Vining. While he admits Vining's influence over him, he does not admit that there is any intellectual justification for it. His brain, Willing argues, is every bit as good as Vining's, but Vining's personality is not only stronger than his, but is—in common with the personalities of other people—directed against him! In the case of Vining, there may have been some truth in this feeling: for Vining undoubtedly had a touch of cruelty and of ruthlessness about him, and may have taken a sadistic pleasure in playing upon his friend's weakness. This may have been so, or not: it is hard to say. But undoubtedly, Willing was labouring under a complete illusion in the case of other people—an illusion

due entirely to his abnormal sense of inferiority. He manages, however, to keep his feelings under, so that they do not appear in his everyday dealings with other people. But the effect produced by this suppression is in no way to rid him of his feeling: it is on the contrary to strengthen it. The feeling becomes an obsession, and the closer his relationship with Vining, the more nearly related with Vining does the obsession become. The obsession is two-fold therefore: there is the obsession that all men, and Vining in particular, are against him: there is also the obsession particularly related to Vining, that he (Willing) in spite of his sense of inferiority is really abler and cleverer than Vining, and that Vining is actually drawing inspiration and strength from him.

Gradually a change comes. The sense of inferiority imperceptibly gives place to, first, jealousy, then to envy, and finally to hatred. The process is slow, but sure. At first the hatred is spasmodic; it flares up suddenly, but subsides again quickly. Here is a typical entry in the diary during one of these fits of hatred; it was made during the war, when Vining had got a temporary post at the Foreign Office:

1917.

Nov. 30. Vining's brilliance! A pure myth. Why do they all make so much of him? They should see through him, as I do. To-night he had friends from the Foreign Office dining with him. They talked on Eastern religions and regarded *him* as an authority! Why was I asked at all? . . . But of course I must be there! "Dear Ben!" No party would be complete

“without “dear Ben!” I sit and must speak when I’m spoken to! and must play up to *him*. The great Vining! Look at the curve of his back as he lolls at the head of his table, with Sulciman at his elbow. . . . And I am supposed to be impressed.

I am sick of it. He is a poseur. He cares nothing for religion: he calls it his hobby! An evening of anecdotes on heathen practices! What a way to impress people! Nothing but book-reading. And what a tone he adopts. One could suppose he were talking of pigeons! [It may be assumed that Dr. Willing himself knew very little of Eastern religions and was consequently bored. But even his boredom is envenomed. What follows is perhaps more pertinent.]

Dec. 1. Not content to talk about religions, V. must needs try and teach me medicine! A long lecture this morning on the standardisation of sera! As if he knew anything about the standardising of sera! But I know his object: he wants to discredit me as a doctor. I know it. I am not modern enough: I don’t keep up with the latest research: I am out-of-date—and so being a bad doctor I have to take my medicine like a good boy from Mister Laurence Vining! The impudent jackanapes, how I detest him! . . .

There are many such entries as this—showing the doctor’s small childish petulant mentality: and through the later entries there is the growing feeling that Vining is his enemy, and is deliberately working against him all the time—now trying to impress him, now finding fault

with him, now ridiculing him—always patronising him. The outbursts of hatred grow more frequent : the causes of them become more and more trivial. Vining's most innocent word or action will be enough to send the doctor spinning in a vortex of internal hatred and abuse. Vining's own temperament does not help matters : even with a considerate man, the doctor would have found his position difficult enough : but Vining was not considerate : he was naturally selfish, and his manner was often provocative. He had a cynical way of saying things : he was at once suave and brutal : undoubtedly he was an able man, but undoubtedly too there were times when he was "out to impress." He probably did regard Willing as inferior to himself in lots of ways, and his half-mocking way of referring to him as "our good Ben here" more than savoured of patronage. He looked upon his friend as one might look on a comfortable tabby.

Yet through their whole relationship the doctor manages to conceal his feelings : never once does Vining appear to have suspected anything serious. He was certainly quite unconscious of the intensity of feeling that he was arousing in his friend's already diseased mind.

The smouldering hatred gradually begins to spread. Fresh ground is broken : new ideas begin to shape themselves. The doctor becomes restless. He sees he is fighting a losing battle. He will never get the better of Vining in this world : he will always be in a state of subjection. . . . Is there no remedy ?

In the final years, Vining takes up criminology, and gains new laurels by the publication of his book, which is immediately hailed as a standard work. Whatever he

touches seems to be successful. On one occasion, when a particular difficult case was threatening to baffle Scotland Yard, he sent such a penetrating analysis to the Chief Commissioner of Police that an arrest was effected in the space of a few hours. On another occasion, Authority itself actually consults him—a most unusual procedure. In course of time he becomes almost an unofficial consultant and friend of Scotland Yard. In all this work he displays an amazing ingenuity and an uncanny intuition. At the same time he treats his friend Willing, with whom he discusses the cases, with an irritating reticence, not uncommon in the case of the amateur detective of fiction. When for instance he is describing his investigations or his theories, he will break off at the critical moment, leaving Ben to “exercise that famous brain of yours.” This sort of thing is calculated to annoy even the alertest of minds: but the effect on Ben was fatal. It gave him full rein to develop his idea that Vining was treating him like a child: that he was out to impress: and that in reality Vining despised him. Moreover the *coup de grace* was given to any theory Ben might have had that he was being useful to his friend. This is the last straw. The time has come to act.

And so it comes about—over a long period of years—that Willing, mainly by reason of the diseased state of his own mind, and partly too as a result of Vining’s actual treatment of him, turns from a useful, though slightly unbalanced, member of the community, into a ruthless monomaniac. His hatred of Vining is complete. He cannot free himself from his influence: still less can

he subject him : only one thing remains to be done, and that is to get rid of him.

His decision to kill Vining brings a certain relief to his mind : it steadies his brain and sharpens his wits. This is the greatest thing that Ben has ever faced and he will take his time about it. It will be no ordinary death : it must be ingenious to the degree of Vining's own ingenuity. It must be one of those crimes that Vining himself would have loved to tackle. . . .

We may now take up the diary again, from the point when he has already taken his decision, and his mind is now fully occupied with details. Vining himself has just completed his investigations in the " Shop Case " and the murderer has - largely owing to Vining's efforts - been brought to justice. If any further encouragement had been necessary to Willing in his project, it would have been supplied by Vining's conduct towards him in this case. The latter's investigations had been carried out with more than his usual brilliance, and his attitude towards Willing had been more patronising than ever.

192-.

July 15. Vining in excelsis again ! Our modern Sherlock ! But he hasn't reckoned with his Watson this time. How the newspapers nauseate me. . . . But never mind : the higher he soars, the greater his fall.

I am hard at work arranging things, and the investigations have begun. (How amiable I am towards him now ! He couldn't wish for a better courtier.) ' This will be the sensation of the year. I see it already in

large print "The Vining Mystery" . . . And the funeral !
I shall be chief mourner, with a front place. . . .

July 27 I think I have found the very people I want.
T P. is already bitter against him I sound him every
day. I think he would go to *any length* L is weak
yet, but we shall bring her round I continue my
investigations Everything is satisfactory It will
be a mystery after his own heart ! And so fitting !

Aug 7 To-day I got V to open the Yellow
cupboard and show me again the famous *Bandarkris*,
and when his back was turned I took a very impression
of the cupboard key So simple ! It is a beautiful knife,
and will suit the purpose admirably I measured the
joint exactly It is a socket spring, and almost any blade
will do Saw T P again to-day I shall probably speak
within the next day or two L still weak, but regaining
strength Investigations very satisfactory

Aug 10 Find I P has been an actor ! How excellent
this is I shall speak to-morrow L is much better
and is of our way of thinking

Called on V to-day He talked of our going to
Italy in October He suspects nothing There is
trouble apparently with Jack for whom I bear no
love, the swaggering cub But I shall take his part
against V It will be so natural for a kind old fogey
like me ! Investigations satisfactory

Aug 12 Have spoken to T P I was dazed by the
news he gave me He says that his father was not
only innocent of the "shop murder," but that
almost beyond doubt—though he could never prove
it—the real murderer was Vining himself ! Vining

the murderer had planted T.P.'s father with the crime! This reveals depths of V.'s nature and devilish ingenuity which even I had never suspected. Whether to believe it or not I can hardly tell, but certainly T.P. believes it. I shall not try to discover the truth, whatever it may be. His belief is sufficient for my purpose. How keenly T.P. himself feels against the man who so villainously brought his father to the scaffold may be imagined. He is, of course, heart and soul with me. *Laus Deo!* Almost now he knows his part to perfection. He promises to get L. in. He knows she will be game. T.P. has taken over investigations. Very satisfactory.

Saturday, Aug. 13. Everything is ready. I went into town to-day and bought a block of common notepaper at a big Wyman's Stores. Envelopes (ordinary court) from Snith's. The first step! How happy I feel! The very air intoxicates me. I walked up the hill this evening past his house and was pondering again on L.'s "distinctive feature", when out of the house pops Grace with a flaming red hat! *Dea ex machina!* I should have noticed her anywhere. Thank you Grace! The investigations are now complete. They show most excellent results and auguries for our purpose. I reckoned that the middle of August would be the deadest part of the deadest month, and my reckoning proved to be correct. The following table shows the number of persons entering and coming out of Hyde Park Tube Station, between the hours of 3.25 p.m. and 3.35 p.m. :

Date.	Number of Persons.		
	Entering.	Coming out	Total
July 15, Fri.	6	3	9
" 16, Sat.	11	5	16
" 17, Sun.	0	1	1
" 18, Mon	3	0	6
" 19, Tues	0	0	0
" 20, Wed	2	0	2
" 21, Thurs	0	0	3
" 22, Fri.	3	2	
" 23, Sat.	10	4	14
" 24, Sun	1	0	1
" 25, Mon	2	1	3
" 26, Tues	0	1	1
" 27, Wed	1	1	2
" 28, Thurs	0	1	
" 29, Fri	3	0	5
" 30, Sat	6	1	1
" 31, Sun	0	1	1
Aug. 1, Mon		2	4
" 2, Tue	1	0	1
" 3, Wed	1	1	
" 4, Thurs	2	0	2
" 5, Fri.	3	2	5
" 6, Sat	4		6
" 7, Sun	0	0	0
" 8, Mon	2	3	5
" 9, Tues.	0	0	0
" 10, Wed	1	2	3
" 11, Thurs	1	0	1
" 12, Fri	1	0	1
" 13, Sat.	2	1	3

From this table it is quite clear that more people pass in and out of the station on Saturdays than on any other day : after Saturday, Friday appears to be the next most crowded day, and after that Monday. Of all days, the least crowded appear to be Sundays and Tuesdays. Of these two days the better for our purpose is Tuesday, as the streets and park are more generally crowded on Sunday. Now the average number of persons going into the station between 3.25 p.m. and 3.35 p.m. every day, leaving out Saturdays and Fridays is 1.1 ; the average number of persons coming out of the station during the same period is .85. The average number of persons going in and coming out is therefore 1.95. Now take Tuesdays alone: the average number going in is .25, and the average number going out is also .25. In other words there is a four to one chance *against* meeting anybody on Tuesday afternoons between 3.25 and 3.35. Moreover a slight allowance must be made for people who go into the station to look at or buy something at the bookstall. There is therefore, *rather more than* a four to one chance against meeting anybody in the lift. Again, the period over which the investigations have been made and the averages taken, covers the end of July, which is a slightly busier month than August. Indeed a graph of the totals from week to week would be a downward curve, and would probably continue downward during the next few days for the middle of August is the deadest time of all.

Sunday, Aug. 14. I thought to type the letter at first : but that would have introduced unnecessary

complications. I therefore wrote it myself in a beautifully uncompromising and unrecognisable hand. I have handled the paper and envelope most carefully with gloves, so as not to leave the slightest trace of a finger-mark. This afternoon I posted it at Hyde Park Corner. . . .

And now as I close my diary for to-night, I already see the end in sight. The first step has been taken. God speed the event !

Monday, Aug. 15. I called on V. this morning and caught him at breakfast. I think he was really quite excited about my letter, and actually asked me to go with him ! How superb ! I scouted the idea "unless I could be of some help to him." I knew that would touch him on the raw.

An unknown visitor called when I was there. As soon as V. had left the room, I slipped the letter into my pocket. V. came back very rattled. How fitting ! I left at once, and took V.'s light mackintosh which was hanging in the hall.

I saw T.P. and L. in the afternoon. I gave him the mackintosh. They are all ready. I also gave them their tickets and money, enough and to spare. T. to send me a wire from France on arrival. T.P. told me that the figures for to-day were one going in, and one going out. This is better than ever for a Monday.

Everything is ready. God grant that I shall be here to write my diary to-morrow. If anything goes wrong, the Spanish poison is most excellent. . . . Poor Martha ! It would be a shock to her. But her

famous "strength of character" should stand her in good stead. I suppose she'll miss me a bit—one person less to bully!

Tuesday, Aug. 16 – 11.45 p.m. The thing is done. In all humility and thankfulness, I lift up my heart to God, who has watched over me and guided my steps this day. . . . My hand shakes as I write but I will try to set down the story to-night, for what shall the morrow bring?

I called on Vining for the last time this morning, ostensibly to borrow a book, actually to take the dagger, and incidentally to make sure that he was, as usual, wearing his blue serge suit. He greeted me as ever with a sneer, asking if I wouldn't change my mind and come and protect him in the afternoon! Even sneers can be pleasant. This one was as balm to my soul. . . . I only spent a quarter of an hour in the house altogether. I easily found a pretext to slip into the study and take what I wanted from the yellow cupboard. It was the work of half a minute. As I came away I saw Gr. e also going out; she was again wearing her red hat.

After my morning rounds—carried through with perfect sang-froid! --I went down into town and made an excellent lunch at Les Gourmets. I lingered over my brandy till just on three. I then took the tube to Hyde Park Corner. It was a glorious summer day, and there were very few people about in the tube. I reached Hyde Park Corner at a quarter past three, and was the only person to get out at that station. I walked slowly up the platform and left it by the "No

Exit " stairs. These stairs brought me to a passage leading to the *Exit* side of the lifts, so that I avoided being seen by the liftman or ticket collector, who always stands on the *entrance* side of the lifts. If I *had* met anyone, it would have been someone who had just come down in the lift and was walking down the passage leading to the platform by means of the stairs which I had just come up. But as it was I met no one. The whole place was absolutely deserted. I might have been down an empty mine. The stillness was almost uncanny. Noiselessly, on rubber soles, I moved along the passage. Just before you get to the lifts, there is a little through-passage leading to the main staircase shaft: this little passage also leads through to the other main passage, that is to say the one I should have been walking along had I left the station platform by the *Exit* stairs instead of the *No Exit* stairs. I passed into the little through-passage, but instead of going right through to the other passage, I turned off and went slowly up the spiral stairs. At the top there is a covered landing, which you have to cross before you reach the small flight of steps leading up to the top station. The walls of this landing are irregular and the angles in them form little recesses in which one or even two people can stand without being observed by anyone coming down the small flight of steps from the station above. In one of the recesses I found T.P. waiting for me. I had arranged that he should arrive by a slightly earlier train from Knightsbridge station, which lies in the opposite direction to Piccadilly station where I had come from.

On arrival at Hyde Park he had left the lower station by the same stairs as I had and had taken the same route as I had as far as the upper landing where we both were now. Although I was expecting to see him, I could not help being startled—if only to a slight degree—by the extraordinary likeness of his figure to that of Vining. I am certain that anyone who had seen Vining only once or twice would have said at a glance that this man was he—and that, too, without the addition of Vining's broad-brimmed hat.

I greeted T.P. with a smile, and wrung his hand as I took my place beside him in the recess. We were both standing in the dim shadow, and were both quite invisible from the small flight of stairs leading up to the station. I glanced at my watch. It was exactly twenty-three minutes past three. In two minutes the drama would begin.

I utilised this short interval to examine the neat little contrivance which I had made and which T.P. was now wearing. It consisted of a leather strap, which he wore round his body underneath his waistcoat. The strap was drawn quite tight so that it could not slip down, and affixed to it at a point on his back between his left shoulder blade and his spine was a small close-knit fine cork block about an inch and a half thick. As he wore his coat loosely—it was unbuttoned in the front—the very slight protrusion caused by this block was absolutely unnoticeable. Into this block was fitted the broken end of a knife blade. The broken blade in question had been that of an ordinary bread knife: I had separated the blade from

the handle of the bread knife, and had broken the blade off just over an inch from the joint. This small broken fragment I had fitted into the cork block, so that the steel joint, which had previously fitted into the handle of the bread knife, was left protruding from the block. A small slit had been made in the back of T.P.'s coat and through this slit the steel joint now showed its head.

As I think I have already said, the famous Bandar *kris*, or in other words Malayan dagger, which I had abstracted from Vining's yellow cupboard that morning, and which I now had with me, was constructed in such a way that its haft or handle was fixed to the blade by means of a socket spring, and could therefore be sprung on or off at will.

It had been a very simple matter to shape the joint of the bread knife so that it fitted into the socket of the dagger-handle. Thus by means of the leather strap and the fine cork block with the broken blade fitted into it, all I had to do in order to give T.P. the appearance of a man who had been stabbed in the back was to fix the dagger-handle into the blade-joint which was protruding from the back of his coat. Anybody observing him casually would see only the handle of the dagger sticking out from his back: anyone looking a little more closely would actually see the beginning of a blade. The rest was entirely hidden by his waistcoat. The dagger—the famous Bandar *kris*—was short, the handle measuring only six inches, and the blade measuring about eight and a half inches: so that when T.P. was wearing his dagger-handle in position, so to speak, he was easily able to hide it by throwing the

light mackintosh over his left shoulder. The ample folds of the mackintosh covered up the dagger-handle, without in the least disturbing its position, for it was sprung quite tightly into the joint, and the joint fitted quite firmly into the cork block, and the cork block was strapped tightly round his chest. To spring the dagger-handle on *or off* the joint was a matter of half a second, just as it was a matter of half a second to spring it on or off the blade joint of the dagger itself. As I wore gloves during the whole of the proceeding, there was no question of any finger-prints appearing on the handle of the dagger. While we were still standing in the recess I fitted the dagger-handle into the joint on 'T P's' back, in order to see that everything was in order. He then threw the mackintosh over his shoulder and its ample folds concealed the handle completely. Owing to the folds the slight protrusion it made under the mackintosh was unnoticeable. Having seen that the device worked perfectly, I took the dagger-handle off his back and replaced it in my pocket.

It was now 3.25 exactly. 'T P' slipped on a black mat and we waited almost breathless with excitement. Then we heard foot steps on the stairs and the rustle of L's skirt. She came abreast of us, but gave us no sign of recognition. She passed on towards the spiral staircase. Ten seconds later we heard other footsteps on the stairs. I immediately recognised Vining's slight tread. Slowly he came down the stairs and on to our landing, following in L's wake. He had no idea of our presence. As soon as he came abreast of us, I put on my step forward, and before

Vining could turn round, T.P. dealt him a terrific blow on the point of the chin. Lest there should be any doubt as to the result of the blow, T.P. wore a knuckle-duster under his glove. T.P.'s fist, however, would have been quite adequate. Vining collapsed like a bolster. I just managed to get behind him and catch him in my arms before he fell to the ground. Quick as lightning, T.P. caught up his legs, and between us we carried him down the spiral staircase, L. going a few steps in front of us. On reaching the bottom step, we put Vining down, so that he lay just off the little connecting passage between the two main passages leading to the lifts, and was quite invisible from the two main passages. We had taken just a minute and a half to carry him down the stairs, so that by the time we arrived at the bottom, it was exactly twenty-seven minutes past three. Up to now everything had gone according to plan. From the blow T.P. had dealt him, I knew that Vining could not possibly stir for another ten minutes at the very least.

I whipped the dagger-handle out of my pocket and fixed it on to T.P.'s back. He took Vining's broad-brimmed hat, stuffed his cap into his pocket, flung Vining's mackintosh over his left shoulder, took the railway ticket to Himpstead which L. had bought and which she now gave him, and sped up the spiral staircase again.

We had to take a certain risk in the matter of the ticket. It was obvious that Vining himself would not have bought a ticket. This fact would not necessarily have been noticed by the upstairs liftman, to whom, of

course, T.P. would have to show a ticket before he could enter the lift. It would have been too risky for T.P. himself to have bought a ticket. We decided, therefore, that L. should get a ticket for Hampstead as well as her own ticket to Dover Street, and give it to T.P. and that T.P. should leave it in the lift. But in the excitement of the moment he must have forgotten to do this, for no ticket was discovered. . . . I think this small omission was the *only* thing that didn't go according to plan. Taking everything into account, we were pretty lucky over the whole affair, and it is perhaps typical of the way in which things work out, that his one little device—the operation of which presented absolutely no difficulty at all—should have missed fire. I can only assume that T.P. must have been so intent in acting his part, that he quite forgot about the ticket. . . . However, the omission, so far, has not caused any trouble.

Leaving Vining where he was L. and I walked out of the connecting passage into the main passage leading from the lifts to the station. There was absolutely no one about. Just before we reached the station L. dropped behind me a little. I walked up the platform noticing, with satisfaction, that according to the lighted sign the next train was a non-stop and would accordingly pass through the station. This matter of the trains I had worked out as carefully as I could. Ordinarily at that time of the afternoon, there would be a train stopping at the station at 3.25, one passing through the station at 3.30 and then another one stopping at 3.35. These times held good for trains going both east

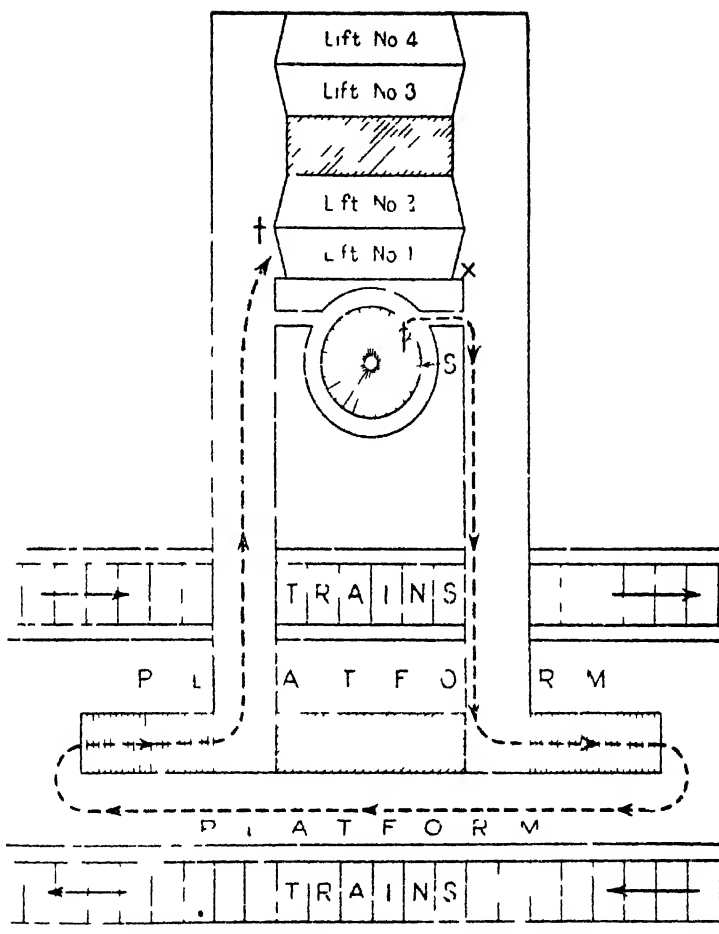
and west. But of course there was almost bound to be some variation in the time of the trains, according to the length of time they had to wait at the various stations in order to pick up passengers. But I was glad to see that the non-stop train—that is, the train due at 3.30—had not yet passed through. I had therefore *over five minutes* clear for the rest of my task. Walking at a moderate pace, I reached the ordinary exit from the lower station as the hands of my watch pointed to twenty-nine and a half minutes past three. This left me a minute to a minute and a half before I was due to arrive at the lifts. I walked up the steps slowly, and at the top I hesitated listening hard for the sound of any footstep. The only footsteps I heard at all were those of Lassie paced slowly up and down the platform, keeping near the foot of the steps which I had just ascended. Otherwise there was not a sound. I walked on slowly toward the turning in the passage: as soon as I passed this turning I should be in full view of the liftman, and should have to continue my journey quite normally. My watch stood at half a minute past the half-past. I decided to take the plunge. I walked on and turned the corner boldly. At the end of the passage—about 40 yards ahead—I saw the liftman; he was leaning against the wall, reading a newspaper. He glanced up at me, when he heard me coming, and then went on reading his paper again. There was no light in any of the lamps above the lift entrance: this meant that none of the lifts was down: I knew that as soon as any of the lifts were about to reach bottom, it automatically switched on a red light over

the entrance. I had gone rather more than 30 yards along the passage when suddenly a red light appeared. This was the moment more than any other when I held my breath. What would the lift contain ?

Our plan had been that as soon as T.P. had helped me to carry Vining down the spiral stairs, he should go up them again, and up the small flight of steps leading from the upper landing (where we had waited for Vining) into the overhead station, and *impersonating Vining* should enter the lift, which by a rather more than four to one chance would be empty. If the lift was standing empty there would of course be no difficulty, for the lift operator whose duty it was to send the lift down would in all probability send it down as soon as T.P. had entered it : if by chance he showed any signs of delaying, in order to collect more passengers before sending the lift down, T.P. had only to tell the man he was in a hurry and the lift would be sent down at once. In the event, however, of T.P. finding some other passenger or passengers either already in the lift waiting to go down or else just about to enter the lift, the plan then was that he would go to the bookstall and wait there ostensibly looking at the books, until the lift had gone down. He was then to take the next lift down which was practically certain to be empty and which in any event he could *cause* to be sent down with himself alone in it, by telling the operator that he was in a hurry, or at all events by slipping a coin into his hand—this last method was not to be resorted to unless it was absolutely necessary (e.g. if T.P. saw other passengers taking their tickets at the booking office prior

to entering the lift) as it would be a somewhat unusual procedure and might give rise to suspicion in the mind of the lift operator. In the extremely unlikely event of T.P. failing on these two successive occasions to get a lift to himself, *the whole scheme was to be abandoned*, as in the first place there was the danger of Vining regaining consciousness, and in the second place I myself would be in difficulties down below.

My own plan of action, corresponding with T.P.'s plans outlined above, was as follows. If the most likely event occurred and T.P. got a lift to himself first time, then my course was plain : if, however, T.P. failed to get a lift to himself first time, and the lift came down with other passengers in it, it was obvious that as in the eyes of the downstairs lift operator I would be ostensibly waiting for a lift to take me up, *I should have to find some suitable pretext for not going up in that lift and for waiting till the next lift came down.* There was, of course, no difficulty in thinking of a simple pretext : on entering the lift before going up, a passenger has to give up his ticket to the lift operator. My pretext would be that I had dropped my ticket somewhere along the passage and I would then go slowly back along the passage ostensibly looking for the ticket on the ground, until I heard the second lift coming down. I would then return to the lifts and if T.P. had succeeded in getting a lift to himself, my course would again be plain. If on the other hand he had failed the second lift contained other passengers, I should know that the whole scheme had been abandoned, and I would go up in the lift, leaving Vining to be discovered or more



X Where it is filled with water

φ Where the source of water is

→ Course full water is flowing in the direction of the arrow

† Where it is not flowing

↳ The up and down

probably to regain consciousness before being discovered. In this event, whatever might happen Vining would never attach any suspicion to me ; for he had never noticed me standing in the recess, at the time when he received his knock-out blow. He would, of course, never dream that I was in any way involved in his adventure. As for the other two, it was highly improbable that he had recognised either of them : it is true that he had met T.P. often enough in the course of his investigations in the "Shop Case," but I doubt very much whether he had time to see and recognise who it was that dealt him the knock-out blow--especially as T.P. was wearing a mask at the time! L. he had never actually met before. In any event both T.P. and L. would be miles away by the time Vining could think of trying to trace them.

In making our plans, we had to take into very serious account the possibility of meeting people coming from the platform to the lifts. The people coming from the lifts to the trains presented little or no difficulty as they were making for the platform and would remain there till the train bore them away. The other people, however, were a serious difficulty. Relying on our calculations, which were based on a month's experience, there was always the four to one chance against meeting anybody : but assuming that we had bad luck and met some people, what was our plan then? It was this : the people we might encounter were divided into two classes ; one class would consist of people who had just got out at the station and were still on the platform when L. and I arrived there, after

leaving Vining at the bottom of the spiral staircase. In the case of these people (and it must be remembered that in all probability their number would be only two or three) our plan was that L. should faint or go into hysterics on the platform ; this action of hers would easily succeed in attracting their attention and keeping them on the platform attending to her for some minutes. I myself would not have stayed but would have continued my journey along the passage towards the lift, and the coast would have been clear. The other class of people we might encounter would have consisted of those who had already left the platform by the time L. and I reached it, and were walking along the passage towards the lift. They would be well ahead of me and would perhaps be waiting at the lifts in order to be taken up. They presented the most serious problem of all, for in the event of their seeing the lift come down with T.P.'s body lying in it, apparently stabbed in the back, my hand would have been very difficult to play. But there were two courses open. I would try in the first place to get them away by rushing up the passage and asking them to go to the help of a lady (i.e., L.), who had gone into hysterics on the station. I should have added at the same time that I was on my way up to the top to fetch medical assistance from St. George's Hospital ; then there would have been no question of my going back to the station. This appeal would in all probability have attracted them, and if they had gone, my course would have been clear. If, on the other hand, they had *not* gone, and we had had to wait for the lift to come down with T.P.'s

supposed dead body in it, my plan was this: assuming that there were only two other people present besides myself and the ticket collector, I should have immediately disclosed the fact that I was a doctor, and should have allowed no one to touch the body: I should have ordered the ticket-collector to go up in the lift for further medical assistance from the Hospital, and I should have ordered the other two to go down to the station to fetch some water and to ask for a stretcher. My course would have been plain. In the event, however, of my being unable to get rid of the people like this, or in the event of there being more than two people (in which case it would have been impossible to get rid of them all) I should have fallen back upon our last desperate plan—not so very desperate perhaps, but still rather risky in that it might have aroused enough suspicion for some of the people to insist on detaining T.P. The plan was this: in the final resort, I was to bend over T.P. saying the words “What a terrible tragedy.” These words were to be the signal for T.P. to jump immediately up and make for the little connecting passage and the spiral staircase. I would pause for a moment, as if thunderstruck, in order to let him get a good start, and then I was to give chase. I would also make for the connecting passage, where of course, I would come across Vining; this would delay matters still more; I would come back to the lift and tell them all of my discovery and by that time T.P. would have got away out of the upper station. In that event, of course, I would have had to stay by Vining—but, as I have already said, he would never come

to know the part I had played in his adventure. This final plan was, it is true, a counsel of despair; but it was, at any rate, comforting to feel that the murder *would never actually be committed until the plan had succeeded*. Right up to the last moment we could draw off, and no one would suspect that we were all involved in a murder plot. If, on the other hand, the plan *did* succeed, then the murder would be carried out and the mystery would be complete.

With such thoughts as these passing through my mind, it was small wonder that I held my breath with excitement when I saw the red light switched on by the down-coming lift. I walked on, calmly enough. I was still three or four yards away from where the ticket-collector was standing, when the lift reached bottom, and to my infinite relief I heard his cry of astonishment. I arrived just in time to see the further gate of the lift swing open and T.P. falling down, taking care, of course, to fall *outside* the lift.

At one time when I was thinking out the arrangements, I suspected that I might have considerable difficulty in getting rid of the ticket-collector. It was, of course, essential that he should witness the fall of T.P.'s body and should see the knife-handle sticking out of his back; it was equally essential that I should thereupon get rid of him for at least a minute in order to complete my task. As I say, I had had certain doubts under this head. It is true that, in a sense, my ability to get rid of the man was a test of my personality, but in reality it was much more a test of my powers of acting. As things turned out my previous doubts

had been quite unnecessary. My immediate assumption of command, and my self-identification as a doctor impressed the ticket-collector immediately; indeed the poor man was all at a loss, and was only too glad to take orders from somebody.

"'Ullo, what's this 'ere!" exclaimed the ticket-collector, gazing through the bars of the near gate.

"Quick!" said I, "open this gate!"

In flinging back the gate the man seemed rather to be obeying my order than acting on his own initiative. We both rushed across the lift; I took care to be a little ahead of him, and as soon as I reached the body, I knelt down close over it. Now came the supreme moment.

"Good God!" I cried, "stabbed in the back! Who can have done this thing!"

The ticket-collector seemed utterly bewildered. I felt T.P.'s pulse (which incidentally was beating at a terrific rate!) and slipped my hand gently under the body and pretended to feel his heart.

"Quite dead!" I exclaimed—and then in a parenthetical tone I added, "I am a doctor." I eyed the man squarely for a few seconds, as if I was making up my mind about something. Then I spoke—"We mustn't move him," I said sternly, "until the police have seen him. Go up in the lift, tell the nearest policeman you can find to come here at once, and also send word to St. George's Hospital. Quick as you can!" I rapped out my orders, and the man got into the lift at once and went up, incidentally taking Vining's mackintosh up with him, lying as it was on the floor of the lift. The man had obeyed me without question!

The rest was plain sailing. The second . . . was out of sight. I whispered the word to T.P., at the same time removing the dagger handle from his back, and fitting it to its real blade which I had brought in my pocket. T.P. got up immediately and sped noiselessly down the passage towards the station in order to join L. who was waiting for him there. They would take the next train—which was due in less than two minutes—to Knightsbridge or alternatively to Dover Street—whichever train came in first—and from there they would proceed to Victoria and catch the 4.0 p.m. Continental express. Even if they came to be suspected—which was in the highest degree improbable—they would be out of the country before they could possibly be arrested.

In the meanwhile, I was left to my final task. In three steps I was beside the still unconscious body of Vining lying at the bottom of the stairs. Putting forth all my strength I carried him to the place where T.P.'s body had lain. The distance was little more than five yards. I set Vining in the exact position that T.P. had adopted (T.P. and I had already, of course, agreed on the position and he had rehearsed it many times), and then without even asking God to forgive me, I plunged the dagger well and truly into his back, so that it pierced the heart. There was no external discharge of blood, and death must have been instantaneous. I then stood a pace back to survey my work. It was perfect. The ticket-collector could not possibly have remarked any difference at all in the position of the body or of the dagger. Yes, it was well done!

At that moment I heard footsteps coming along the passage—not the one down which T.P. had sped towards the platform, but the other one leading from the platform to the lift. I knelt on one knee by the body, and assumed a horror-stricken countenance ; I was in this position when two passengers— a man and a woman—came into sight on the other side of the lift shaft. I immediately called them to come round to my side by means of the little connecting passage. This they did, and I explained to them what had happened. I had just finished my explanation when the lift came down with the police. Together we carried the body round to St. George's Hospital. After seeing the body into the mortuary I slipped unobserved up to Jack's room, so that I might be the first to break the news. But he was not there. As I was leaving his room, I discovered *to my horror* that I still had the dagger sheath in my pocket !

The constable was waiting downstairs to take my evidence. Supposing he were to search me ! What a thought ! I must dispose of the sheath at once . . . no matter what the cost, or what suspicion I might cast upon others . . . Without stopping to think I slipped it under Jack's mattress, and rushed from the room. Without being observed I regained the entrance hall of the hospital where I gave my evidence blandly enough to the constable.

It is late—near 3 o'clock. Let the last words of this entry be : “ I have done what I have done and am unrepentant. I have triumphed over my enemy and there is one less scourge in the world ! ”

I HAVE given the final entry in the diary, and I can well conceive that Dr. Willing had no heart to turn to the book again. As it is, I am presenting it to Inspector Widgeon, who, I understand, is going to place it in the Black Museum at Scotland Yard.

There remains little to add. One point has always puzzled me a little. I acquit the doctor of any preconceived intention to incriminate Jack Ransome. I can understand his feeling of panic when he found himself still in possession of the sheath. On the other hand, he undoubtedly *did* attempt to throw suspicion on Suleiman. I think the explanation must be that he himself became a little frightened and took the chance that offered of trying to fit an almost, but not quite, impossible theory into a given set of facts—in order to divert suspicion from himself. I do not think he bore any active hostility to Suleiman. But I am never sure about this.

Jack and Pamela have been married over a year now, and they have one son, who is *not* called Laurence, or Benjamin, or Suleiman, but takes after his father and his grandfather and is called Jack.

And finally—if you go now to Hyde Park Tube Station you will find that the booking-office has been closed, and that you are requested to take your ticket at a little office in the lift itself where a man is always on duty: so that now it is impossible to travel in the lift alone, at any rate at Hyde Park Tube Station. This innovation was certainly made after the death of Laurence Vining; but whether it is a case of *post hoc, propter hoc*, I do not know.

'The Talisman has never been insured. Why should we insure it?' It always comes back. We have electric alarms on all the outer doors and the windows of course, but they are merely put on because my wife is nervous. The Talisman can look after itself, I assure you.'

Old Rollo Dangerfield seemed very sure of himself as he showed the fabulous family heirloom to his guests. And two days later, when the Talisman disappeared from its case in the Corinthian room, he remained equally unperturbed.

It was stolen on an oppressive, thundery night and several of the guests had difficulty in producing an alibi. Lilcen Cressage, who had lost so heavily at bridge, would not say why she was away from her room for several hours. Mr. Wraxall, the American collector, admitted wandering about the house during the night. Mrs. Brent, who had said that thunderstorms drove her almost insanely nervous, had left suddenly in her yacht. And old Dangerfield's indifference was somehow strangely perturbing.

THE DANGERFIELD TALISMAN

By the same Author

DEATH AT SWAYTHLING COURT
NORDENHOLT'S MILLION
THE COUNSELLOR
THE FOUR DEFENCES
MURDER IN THE MAZE
NO PAST IS DEAD
TRUTH COMES LIMPING
THE TWENTY-ONE CLUES

THE DANGERFIELD TALISMAN

By
J. J. CONNINGTON



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The characters, places, and events described in this book are entirely imaginary and have no connection, either direct or indirect, with any real persons, places, or events.

Chapter I

'LUCKY again, partner,' commented Westenhanger, breaking into Lileen Crossage's thoughts as he took up the scoring-block 'That's game and rubber Douglas Your mind must be wandering'

Douglas Fairmile had glanced down the room to where a fair-haired girl was sitting with a rather red-faced man Douglas's brows contracted slightly That fellow Morchard had attempted to monopolise Cynthia this evening, but surely anyone could see that the girl was bored A persistent creature Morchard rather too persistent at times Douglas felt Then at the sound of Westenhanger's voice, his attention came back to the bridge-table

'Game and rubber?' he repeated Sorry, partner My fault entirely You see I'm getting rusty in auction nowadays It's nearly gone out at my club, nobody plays it any more We're all on to this new game that's just come in'

'New game' What new game' demanded Westenhanger arranging the cards for his shuffle 'Have the Cardsharps rediscovered Old Maid or the simple joys of Happy Families' Out with it, Douglas

Douglas Fairmile made a gesture as though apologising for Westenhanger

'Tut! Tut! He's jealous, poor fellow My fault for mentioning the Roman Club A sort subject with Conway, and no wonder You know, we have an entrance examination for candidates test 'em in following suit and remembering what's trump And somehow Conway didn't get in Or else he was afraid to enter A sad business, anyhow, don't let's dwell on it So he calls us the Cardsharps out of spite'

Mrs. Caistor Scorton began to deal. Douglas passed the box of cigarettes to Eileen; and, when she refused, took one himself. Westenhanger looked at him with feigned anxiety.

'I notice a certain tendency to wander in your talk, of late. This inconsecutiveness of mind is growing on you, Douglas. Do you ever find yourself, in the morning, putting on your jacket first and your waistcoat afterwards? Pull yourself together. Squalls Up-to-date, or something like that, was what you were trying to tell us about before you began to ramble.'

'Oh! Suspension Bridge, that's it. Suspension Bridge. Never heard of it.' Well, well. These soulless mechanics! You take the two of spades out of the pack, put in a joker instead; and then play according to auction rules. You've no notion of the superior feeling it gives you when you go No Trump with five aces in your hand. Confidence, that's the word! A splendid game.'

'Splendid!' Westenhanger conceded, sarcastically. 'Invite me to take a hand in the inaugural game, will you? It'll be an historic occasion, no doubt; and I might get my name into the newspaper.'

Douglas looked hurt.

'He doesn't believe me, Eileen, he thinks I'm... Oh, sorry!'

He picked up his cards, and the game continued. For the third time in succession, Eileen Cressage laid down her hand with an inaudible sigh of relief. Being dummy, she could think about other things than the table before her. She had never been a keen bridge-player; her card-memory was too weak for anything beyond the most obvious tactics. And on this evening especially, her interest in the game was of the slightest. She played mechanically; and she had quite failed to note how, time and again, a skilful intervention by her partner had extricated her from a risky declaration.

As Westenhanger gathered up their first trick, her mind

went back to the ever-present money difficulties. Some bills had reached her by the last post. Somehow, bills always dropped in at that time; and she had begun to dread the very sight of an unsealed envelope among her correspondence. If these wretched things had come in the morning, the affairs of the day might have helped to put them out of her mind; but when they arrived after dinner, they seemed to rivet her attention through the whole night.

The problems of a girl trying to keep up a decent appearance on a tiny income seemed to be approaching an insoluble state. Her quarter's income was nearly exhausted; and yet something would have to be done. It was no use approaching her trustees in the hope of anticipating her income for the next three months. She had tried that before; and all she had got was a lecture on the folly of over-spending. It appeared that the thing was impossible under the will. Besides, the trustees were simply lawyers, without a spark of personal interest in her affairs or herself. So far as they were concerned, Eileen Cressage was a name on a deed-box or a docket. No help there, obviously.

And yet something would have to be done. She could pay some of her creditors and leave the rest of the affairs standing; but which people ought she to attend to first? Her mind was busy with a sort of jigsaw puzzle with the bills as a picture and the available money as the pieces; but with half the fragments missing, it was a hopeless business. One fact was evident, some of these bills would have to be settled, and settled soon.

With an effort she put the whole affair at the back of her mind and tried to divert her attention. But her first glance across the room brought the thing back to her from a different angle. There was her host, old Rollo Dangerfield, sitting in a despondent attitude beside the window. What had he to be low-spirited about? If she herself owned the Dangerfield Talisman, her troubles would be conjured away. The thing was worth £50,000 on the last occasion when it

had been valued; and the price of diamonds had gone up a good deal since then.

Her eyes passed to where Mrs. Brent and the American collector sat. Neither of them had money worries. At sixty, Mrs. Brent seemed to get a good deal out of life; and the steam yacht in the bay at the foot of the garden was a fair proof that a few hundred pounds one way or the other was not likely to trouble her.

A rustle of the cards brought Eileen's attention to the bridge table. She leaned back a little in her chair and glanced, with an envy which was quite devoid of malice, at the three players intent on their game.

Mrs. Gaistor Scotton's husband had been one of those hard-faced men who had made fortunes in the War. When he died she had got the money, and her enemies said that the hard face had been bequeathed also, in a codicil to his will. She certainly had a very keen appreciation of the value of a Treasury note.

Then there was Douglas Fairmile, with a big private income. His only worry at present was whether Cynthia Penard would marry him or not. No great need for anxiety there, Eileen reflected. Cynthia wasn't throwing herself at his head, certainly; but it was one of those affairs which are bound to come right in the end. If only her own affairs would look as bright!

Finally, her partner, Conway Westenhanger, very obviously hadn't a care in the world. Those mechanical inventions of his were known to be small gold mines; he wasn't in love with anyone; and he got on well with people. What more could a man want?

Half unconsciously she compared the two men. Douglas was once described to her as 'one of those delightful people who can always be cheery without getting on your nerves with it'. He had the gift of playing the fool in season without looking a fool while he was doing it. One laughed with him, always, and never at him. Conway Westenhanger was

a more complex person, but just as attractive in his own way. She liked his mouth, its clean-cut lines seemed to have something sympathetic in their curves, and the thinker's sharply-marked vertical lines between the eyebrows rather added to the attractiveness of his face

Mrs Brent broke the silence, addressing her host

'Rollo' would you mind if we have that window opened further? The heat's almost unbearable to-night'

Old Dangerfield came out of his brown study with a start made a gesture of acquiescence, and threw open the window to its full extent. Through the embrasure a faint breath of air wandered in from the outer twilight, laden with the smell of parched soil and the heavy perfume of flowers, but it brought no coolness with it

'I suppose this doesn't affect you, Mr Wraxall?' Mrs Brent turned to the American beside her 'You're a New Yorker, aren't you? Heat waves won't trouble you as much as they do me. You're acclimatised, no doubt'

'It's warm to-night. It's certainly not what one calls cool. But I'll admit that I've known it hotter over there. And this air of yours hasn't got that used-up feeling about it that city air has. It's fresh even if it's hot. You'd know it was garden air and not street air even if the flowers weren't there. But you're wrong about my being acclimatised. I don't use New York much in the summer'

'Of course you've got a country big enough to let you choose your climate for almost any day in the year haven't you? Well there's something to be said for an island. If this heat gets worse I shall simply take the *Kestrel* away for a night or two until the hot spell is over. Another couple of days of this would be unbearable. Luckily the Dangerfields understand me they won't be offended if I disappear without warning. One would think twice about doing that with most people, but Fricksheim is a real Liberty Hall'

'They've been very kind in asking me down,' the American explained 'I didn't know them, but I got an introduc-

tion; and when I explained I was interested in some of their things, they invited me to stay for a few days.'

He glanced through the window and across the moonlit bay which stretched beyond the lawns

'The *Kestrel*? Little white yacht with copper funnels, lying in the bay? Is that the one? I saw her as I drove up here this evening'

'Yes, that's the *Kestrel*. You liked her looks?'

'Very pretty Graceful lines, she has. My own yacht's rather larger, but she's not so neat, not so neat I wanted lots of room on board'

'The very thing I didn't want on the *Kestrel* I use her as a kind of retreat, Mr Wraxall, the place for a rest-cure I've never had a guest on board, there isn't even a spare cabin. Sometimes I want to get clean away from everybody, and that was the best way I could think of for managing it. Callers don't drop in when one's fifty miles from port'

The American looked at her with interest kindling in his eyes

'You feel that way, too? That's interesting That's very interesting I take it you're not a philanthropist then?'

Mrs Brent shifted her position slightly and looked up at her neighbour's clean-shaven face. It was of the long rather than the square American type, the face of a man with a certain imagination

'If you mean contributing to charitable funds and that sort of thing I'm certainly not philanthropic' she answered 'I don't think I've spent a penny in that way during the last ten years. People come bothering me with tales of sad cases, at least they used to do that. But once you get the name of being kind hearted you're simply pestered to death by demands, mostly from frauds. I've shed that reputation long ago. I don't say I don't give something here and there. Everybody does. But unless I see a thing with my own eyes I refuse to part with a farthing. My eyesight is still fairly good for my age, and I'm quite able to see a thing for myself

without needing some fussy creature to point it out to me'

She broke off suddenly and showed her fine teeth in a faint smile

'You've touched there on a thing that always irritates me. I've got rather a bad reputation over it. They call me a skinflint. There's an American phrase for that, isn't there?'

'You mean a tight wad, perhaps. Yes, that would be it, a tight-wad.'

He dismissed the subject, seeming to think of something else.

'A minute or two back you were saying you wanted to get away from humanity now and again. I sympathise with you there. I can understand the feeling. I open a newspaper in the morning and it says a new fibre has made finer lingerie possible. I don't use lingerie. Further on, there's something else about floor stains. That lacks the personal appeal. So does the one about candies. My digestion's too poor for candies. Then I come across "Buy Jones's Razors." I don't buy Jones's razors. Perhaps my man buys them. I don't know. But you see how it is. Everywhere one goes these things hit the retina. There's no escape from this modern way of pushing things. My own company does it. I get tired of it. I want to forget Jones's razors, and Smith's Confectioned Candies, and and dollars, and cents, and the whole twentieth century. I want to blot it all out of my mind. I want to get among old things, things that were made long before dollars were thought of. That's restful. That's the kind of thing I like. Something that looks as if your Queen Elizabeth might have used it, or one of your Henries. If it's got a history attached to it, I like it all the more.'

Mrs. Brent's face showed a kind of sympathy and amusement.

'So that's how you became a collector?'

Wraxall smiled also.

'Well, Mrs. Brent, that's part of the truth. That certainly

is a factor. But there's more to it than that. You may laugh at me if you like. You may certainly laugh. But I love these old things for themselves. It gives me a real pleasure to handle them, just to turn them over and over and look at them. And to wonder about the people who wore them. These things mean more to me than all the history-books. Much more.'

Mrs Brent's white-framed face became more sympathetic. She recognised a kindred spirit in the American, although his line of escape from the modern world was not the same as her own.

'Don't forget to see the Dangerfield Talisman before you go, Mr Wraxall. They'll be glad to show it to you and to tell you the legend. There are some photographs of it, too. You might be able to take one of them back for your collection.'

Mr Wraxall brushed the suggestion aside.

'Photographs would be no use to me. They haven't the appeal No.'

He paused for a moment; then, studying her face, he continued:

'I thought of taking the thing itself back with me in the fall, if it could be arranged.'

'The Dangerfield Talisman?' Mrs Brent almost lost her manuers in her astonishment. 'You thought of taking that back with you! Why, the thing's absurd. They'd sooner part with Friocksheim than with the Talisman, and they've held Friocksheim since before the Conquest.'

'I wouldn't stick at a few thousand pounds one way or the other. I'd set my heart on getting that Talisman. I've come four thousand miles for it, specially. That shows I'm interested. I'm keenly interested. I'm not a bargainer. They've only to name their price and I'll pay it.'

'But, my dear man, this isn't a case where money comes in at all, don't you see? The thing's unbuyable, you may take my word for it.'

The American scanned her face carefully.

'I see you mean it,' he commented, 'but I came here specially to procure that Talisman. I couldn't be content to take your word for it. Maybe you're right. Perhaps you know best. But I'll have to go to headquarters with my offer and make sure. I'm not doubting what you say. Not at all. I hadn't a notion there was any difficulty in the road. None at all. But you'll understand that, without doubting what you say in the very least, I've got to make sure.'

Mrs. Brent had recovered from her astonishment.

'Oh, certainly, go ahead. I shan't feel offended, if that's what you mean. But I warn you that it's quite useless—out of the question.'

The American made a non-committal gesture. Mrs. Brent thought it best to change the subject.

'This heat seems to be getting worse, if anything. I must really get a fan. I'm old-fashioned enough to have one.'

She rose and left the room. Wraxall transferred his interest to his host who was still gazing absently out over the gardens. Mrs. Brent's evident amazement at his suggestion had given the American something to think about. Things were not going to be so simple as he had imagined. He glanced across at P'ollo Dangerfield's profile, trying to estimate the chances of overcoming his objections if he really proved obdurate.

'Why, he might be an old Norseman come to life,' Wraxall said to himself. 'Put one of those winged helmets on his head, and with that profile and that big white mou tache he could sit to any painter for the portrait of a Viking. He's not likely to be anybody's money when it comes to bargaining. Stubborn. Obstinate. It's going to be none so easy after all.'

He studied his host covertly until he was interrupted by Mrs. Brent's return. She slipped into her chair and began to fan herself with an air of relief.

'This is the kind of night when one appreciates the

Dangerfield methods,' she said after a time. 'They know how I hate climbing stairs, and they gave me a room on the ground floor. It's the only one, all the rest are above. I blessed them just now as I passed the stair-case and remembered that I might have had to climb it. I've got to the age when one economises on the unnecessary as far as possible, and I count stair climbing as a luxury on that standard.'

A great moth swept suddenly in through the open window, veered and swerved blindly over Rollo Dangerfield's head, and then blundered out once more into the darkness. Mrs. Brent followed its flight, and her eyes caught the sky beyond the embrasure.

'Rollo!' she raised her voice to attract his attention. 'Is there any sign of that thunderstorm breaking?' I wish it would come and perhaps the air would clear a little after it.'

Old Dangerfield leaned forward a little and scanned the visible horizon.

'I'm afraid it's no good. The clouds are lighter than they were an hour ago, and I shouldn't expect it to break to-night now.'

Mrs. Brent tanned herself resignedly.

'I'm not altogether sorry. That cure is almost as bad as the disease for me. Mr. Wraxall. A thunderstorm shakes my nerves to pieces always—I don't know why. I'm not afraid of being struck, or anything of that kind, but the noise of thunder seems to get down somewhere into my subconsciousness and set me all on edge. After a real bad storm I'm hardly normal. I feel I might do anything wild, try to fly downstairs, steal my best friend's spoons, or something equally idiotic.'

The American looked at her with a faint twinkle in his eye.

'Now that's curious, Mrs. Brent, that's very curious indeed. For, you see, thunderstorms take me quite the other

way. I like them. I'd sit up all night to watch a good thunderstorm. Give me a chair, and a good wide window, with not too much iron near it, and I'd be content to watch the flashes so long as they like to come.'

He turned to the nearest window as he spoke, and then seemed to study it for a moment or two.

'That kind of window wouldn't be much use as a stall for the performance. It's too deep-set. Are the walls of this house really a couple of yards thick, the way they seem to be at the window-sill there?'

'Several feet thick in this part of Friocksheim. This is the old part of the house, you know--some of it dates from the time when the place was a castle, and they had to make walls thick and windows small. And of course that's quite a recent thing. Here and there about the building you'll find remnants of a much older Friocksheim. There's a gateway you must get the Dangerfields to show you. It's old enough to satisfy you, I should think.'

'I'd like to see it. It would be very interesting to me. And there must be some things worth visiting in the neighbourhood too. Perhaps you could tell me what I ought to go and see?'

'There's a battered sort of monument on the road to Frogsholme village, about a mile and a half from here. I believe I remember hearing that it had something to do with Runic, whatever that is. And there are one or two other things you might care to look at.'

For a time she gave him the benefit of her rather scrappy knowledge of the local antiquities, while he jotted down notes in his pocket-book. At last, when he had exhausted her store, he looked at his watch and made a gesture of apology.

'It's late, Mrs. Brent. I really hadn't meant to keep you so long. But what you've been telling me is interesting, and I've got a thirst for knowledge about that kind of thing. You've helped me considerably. That information will be of great assistance to me.'

'Why not begin with the nearest? Mr Dangerfield will be delighted to show you the Talisman to-night, I'm sure, if you wish it. And be sure to get him to tell you the legend of the pool. It may save you trouble, you know. You'll see that your idea about the Talisman is quite hopeless.'

'That's an idea. That's a good idea, Mrs Brent. I always like to know, right away, what sort of proposition I'm up against. I've not given up hope yet, you understand? I'm quite set on taking that Talisman home with me somehow, if it can be managed. And I think it can, one way or another.'

Conway Westenhanger's voice came across the room. The bridge-table was breaking up.

'I make it twenty-seven pounds twelve. You might check the figures, Douglas. I'm more at home in the calculus than in simple arithmetic, and it's quite likely I've made a slip.'

'Right,' said Douglas. 'It isn't your honesty I'm in doubt about, merely your capacity. The great brains are always a bit one-sided - top-heavy, if you take my meaning. Let's see. Eight and six.'

He rapidly checked the addition.

'Correct! Well, you scrape through with a caution this time, but don't do it again.'

Mrs Caistor Scorton produced a roll of notes and counted out twenty-seven pounds ten on the table between Lileen and herself.

'One moment. I have a florin somewhere.'

'Don't trouble about it,' Lileen hastened to reassure her. 'You needn't hunt for it. Let it stand.'

Mrs Caistor Scorton continued her search and at last discovered the missing coin.

'I don't like letting things stand over. Settle for cash that's always been my principle in bridge. I can't be worried with remembering odd shillings from day to day.'

Lileen Cressage picked up her winnings gratefully. She was not disturbed by Mrs Caistor Scorton's manner. She

was too overwhelmed by relief. Here was an absolute windfall which would go some distance towards solving the problem of her debts. Twenty-seven pounds! And she had given only half her attention to the game. If she had put her mind to it they might have won a good deal more. She had not even asked what stakes they were playing for; she had been too worried to think about that. A couple more nights like this and she would be able to pay off all her creditors.

'Sorry I shan't be able to give you your revenge to-morrow, Douglas,' she heard Conway Westenhanger say, as he rose from the table. 'I've got to run up to town for a couple of days. My patent-agent seems to have got on the track of an infringement of one of my affairs, and he wants to go into the business. That means Chancery Lane, Patent Office Library, and all the rest of it. Whew! It will be hot!'

Douglas's good-natured face corrugated in a grin of commiseration, but already he was moving across the room to where Cynthia Pennard was sitting. Morchard watched his coming with a discontented eye.

Mrs. Brent, glad to be relieved from the American's inquisition on local monuments, went across to Rollo Dangerfield's chair and gazed out of the window.

'No, that storm on't break to-night. I'm afraid. It's moved further on. But it's got on my nerves already. I wish it would break and get the thing over. This heat wave might pass, then.'

She drew back from the embrasure and bent over old Dangerfield.

'Rollo! I think Mr. Wraxall would like to have a look at the Talisman to-night, if you aren't too tired.'

Rollo Dangerfield heaved himself up out of his chair, his six-foot height overtopping Mrs. Brent's slight figure as he rose.

'Certainly, if Mr. Wraxall wishes it. We can go along now, if he cares about it.'

Eileen Cressage had caught the rapid interchange of talk.

'Oh! Are you going to tell him the legend? May I come? I'd like to hear it.'

'What legend? About the Talisman? I haven't heard it either,' said Westenhanger. 'Do you mind my coming with you along with the rest?'

Rollo Dangerfield's smile had a touch of wistfulness, in which it seemed curiously alien from the general cast of his features.

'Anyone who is interested will be welcome,' he said, with a touch of an old-fashioned courtesy which seemed to be so much in character in his case. And, crossing the room, he opened the door for the party to pass out under his guidance.

Chapter II

THE group of Rollo Dangerfield's followers diminished as it passed along the corridor. At the main entrance Douglas and Cynthia slipped aside and went off by themselves down the broad steps into the gardens. Further on beyond the great staircase Mr. Brent bade her companions good night and turned into her room. Only five of his guests were left to follow the old man to the end of the corridor, where he threw open an unlocked door.

This is what we call the Corinthian's Room,' he explained as he ushered them into it. 'It was my grandfather's favourite spot in the house and it got its name from him. He was one of the Regency Bucks—no worse than the rest of them, perhaps, but a hard liver and a hard gambler in his day. An eccentric too, like most of them. I can show you one of his eccentricities in a moment if you care to see it.'

The room was about forty feet square with a huge stone fireplace. A great cupboard of oak occupied part of one wall. Another wall was hung with an aged tapestry representing Diana pursuing a stag. The floor was of marble slabs, mainly white, but in the centre, black squares of marble had been introduced so as to make a gigantic chess-board pattern. Opposite the fireplace was a narrow and shallow niche filled with a glass case.

Rollo Dangerfield switched on the electric lights and led the visitors towards the recess. As they came near it, they saw within the case a ball of faintly tinted glass, under which lay, on a velvet bed, an ancient ornament.

'That is the Dangerfield Talisman,' said old Rollo, pointing to the case. 'You can see what it is—one of those golden

armlets which were worn in the olden times. It's too heavy for our modern tastes, I'm afraid. You would hardly care to carry that, Miss Cressage.'

He turned to Eileen with a faint smile.

'It's very heavy for an ornament—something over a pound, I believe,' he went on, as his guests drew nearer to look closely at the jewel. 'Of course the value of the gold is nothing to speak of—perhaps under a hundred pounds. The stones are of more interest in some people's eyes. There are eight of them in all—you can see the others reflected in the mirror at the back if you look closely.'

Mrs. Caistor Scorton examined the Talisman with an appraising eye.

'I agree with you. It's too heavy in the design.'

Eileen Cressage bent forward and seemed to compare the size of the ornament with her own white arm.

'If a girl wore that,' she said, 'he must have been splendid. It's not a bit clumsy. She must have been slim if anything, with small hands, or she couldn't have got it over them.'

'Let's try it on,' Miss Cressage said. Morchard, suddenly, and he moved forward as he spoke. The case had a plain sheet of glass immediately in front of the jewel, through which it could be examined, whilst at either side was a glass door kept secured by a tiny handle. As Morchard put out his hand, Rollo Dangerfield stopped him with a gesture.

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'but it's one of our family customs never to take the Talisman out of its case—never even to lift the shade from it.'

He smiled, faintly apologetic, but evidently unbending in defence of his traditions.

'These ideas grow up somehow, in ways that are difficult to trace back to their births, but as time goes on they gain a sort of sanctity from tradition, and speaking for myself, I should be sorry if I were the first of us to break this particular custom. There are so few of the old things left in

this twentieth century world, and perhaps you young people won't grudge me this one, if I keep it'

The touch of wistfulness had come back into his voice, robbing his refusal of the faintest trace of offence. Eileen, afraid that some of the others might embarrass the old man by pressing him to let them handle the jewel, hastened to put in a word before Morchard could open his mouth.

'I'd love to try it on, but what Mr. Dangerfield says is quite right. And now I'd like to hear its story—the legend, I mean.'

Rollo Dangerfield silently invited them to seat themselves. Then, leaning against the case containing the Talisman, he turned to face his audience and began to speak. At first he seemed nervous of his effect, but as the tale went on, his voice changed into a monotone, as though he were reciting some well-remembered ritual.

'You must bear in mind that this is a very old tale, far older than any written document that we have. True enough, it fits the geography of Frocksheim, but for all we know, the legend may be far older than Frocksheim and may deal with some Pool which none of us has ever seen. You know that we Dangerfields came into England from the North, away back in the troubled days before the Conquest. Frocksheim, I'm told, is a corruption of Freca's Heim. Frea's Heim, the dwelling of Frea, the wife of Odin. There is no doubt about us as a race.'

He lifted his old head proudly, and the Viking resemblance stood out undeniably in his features. Then, with a smile that showed the strong white teeth, he added:

'I needn't emphasize the final stage in the corruption of the name as you had it in the village. Our Frocksheim has changed to Froesholme, on the lips of these godless aborigines.'

He paused for a moment and shifted his position slightly, so that he could see the Talisman as it lay under his arm.

'You must understand, then,' he went on, 'that this legend

comes down to us from days when Valhalla still opened its gates to the heroes, and the spirits of winds, and woods, and streams, moved among men in their visible forms. It may be mere allegory, possibly it is the transmutation of some quite normal happening, a love tale magnified and distorted in the telling.

'One summer's night, the legend runs, Ulric, the Lord of Friocksheim, went out into the moonlight, seeking coolness after the heat of his castle walls. And, so wandering, he came by the Pool and sat beside the water watching the rising of the mist from the surface of the mere. As he sat thus, lost in thought, the moonlight sparkled upon something before him, and, bending forward, he grasped the Talisman. So he sat, with the amulet in his hand and as he watched the mists of the lake grew denser and drew closer, and there stepped at last from among their folds a maiden.'

Old Rollo bent towards the Talisman, so that his face was partly hidden from his audience.

'Very little has come down to us—only a few words in a tale. Yet even these halting words conjure up for me a wonder—a being, young and proud, and fair, a form and grace surpassing all the beauty of women—a flash of the divinity passing across the screen of the flesh.'

He let his voice drop into silence for a moment before he continued.

'The legend tells that she was betrothed to the Spirit of the Pool, the Frog King. But Ulric won her. She gave him the Talisman which he had come back to seek and, when he desired her, he had but to dip it in the Pool and she came to him—for so long as that moon still shone. And she charged him, when she was with him to keep the Talisman and to hand it down, for it would be the Luck of Friocksheim. And so, night after night, the Lord of Friocksheim went down to the Pool and washed the Talisman in its waters and wandered with his love in the wood beside the mere—until the moon came no more over the trees. But the

next night, when he dipped the Talisman in the waters, there came swimming to him a loathsome little shape which laughed and jeered at him, saying: 'The Frog King has her for his bride'

Old Rollo turned back towards his audience again

'So the Dangerfield Talisman is only a reminder of an old lie. Even at the best it's a memorial of lying and deceit—and punishment'

His voice sounded bitter for a moment, but he went back at once to his ordinary tone

'There it is—the Dangerfield Luck. I don't say I believe the legend, I won't say I doubt it. However the thing came to us, it's our oldest possession and experts tell me that the workmanship is extraordinarily old. And now, I think I can show you something less romantic, though it's not without its interest'

He moved forward and pushed aside some rugs with his foot, so that the black and white marble squares in the centre of the floor were cleared

'I told you, I think that this was the room mainly used by my grandfather, the Corinthian. It was, in fact, the very last room he ever entered. Possibly some of you remember something about the agency times—the gambling—the prize-fighting—the duelling that went on. Eccentricity was often the pass-key to notoriety in those days, some of the bucks cultivated it wilfully. I believe that my grandfather was genuinely eccentric in this particular affair. He was a fanatic for chess playing and this was his chess board. You see the marble square on the floor'

He stooped down and lifted a metal plug from the centre of a square

'Each of these squares has a plug like this at its centre. They're really put in to keep dirt out of the holes when no game is being played. When they wanted to set the pieces, all the plugs were taken out, and then the board was ready.'

He stepped across the room and threw open the oaken cupboard on the wall

'These are the chess-men You see they are on a scale to match the board, each of them about a foot and a half high Mr Westenhanger, would you mind lifting one of them out— a pawn will do They're too heavy for me, nowadays'

Westenhanger came forward and gripped one of the iron pieces

'Lift it up off the shelf before you pull it forward' said old Dangerfield 'There's a spike on the foot of each piece, fitting into a hole in the shelf the spike that goes into the hole in the chess-board so that the piece can't be accidentally knocked over They're top-heavy things The Staunton pattern wasn't invented in those days'

It took more effort than Westenhanger had expected to lift the thing from its place and carry it over to the chess-board He dropped it into position on one of the squares, the iron rod slipping easily into the hole and fixing the piece firmly

'Rather like a railway chess-board isn't it' he said as he went back to his seat 'but a good deal of trouble to play a game with piece of that weight I should think'

Old Rollo's eyes twinkled

'I doubt if they'd have played much if they'd been left to their own exertions As a matter of fact each player had a lackey to shift his pieces for him while he sat comfortably in his chair'

He came forward and sat down as he spoke

'This chess-board looks innocent enough, but it brought the death of my grandfather You know what it was like in those days men would quarrel about the tint of a snuff-box and fight a fatal duel over the fit of a cravat My grandfather was as much of a fire-eater as his friends Some miserable squabble took place in this room while they were actually playing on that board, probably a mere drunken differ-

ence of opinion about some absurd trifle or other. They went out with pistols in the dawn, and the other man was the luckier of the two. Perhaps he deserved to be. No one knows now what they fought about. My grandfather was shot in the head—killed instantly.’

Rollo Dangerfield rose, and drawing from his pocket a bunch of keys, he opened a small safe buried in the wall of the room beside the fire-place. From one of the divisions of the safe he extracted a worn-looking paper and a peculiar disc-like object.

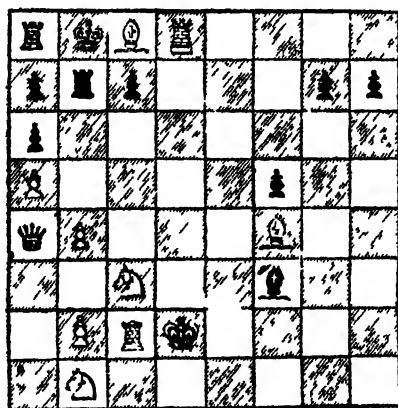
‘Here are two other relics. We preserve most things, and as this was the last document my grandfather put on paper, we’ve kept it in safety. You may as well see it.’

He handed the paper to Wraxall, who studied it intently before passing it to his neighbour. At the top of the sheet were two lines of handwriting:

NOX NOCTI INDICAT SCIENTIAM

MATT VI 21 LUKE XII 34

Below this was a rough diagram of a chess-board with certain pieces placed as in an end-game or a problem.



Wraxall turned the paper over in search of something further; but the back of the sheet was blank.

The American passed the manuscript to Mrs. Caistor Scorton and held out his hand for the second object which Rollo Dangerfield had taken from the safe. It was a circular disc cut from a sheet of leather. Originally the sheet may have been the same thickness as a boot-sole, or rather thinner; but a century of atmospheric changes had warped and contorted its form. Evidently when new it had been about two and a half inches in diameter. Through the centre of the leather there passed a piece of twine secured on one side of the disc by a knot and looped on the other side into a fixed ringlet of a size which would just admit a hand. Wraxall turned the object over and over, but it suggested nothing to him. After a final inspection, he passed it also to his neighbour, and then turned inquiringly to Rollo Dangerfield.

'It suggests nothing to you?' Old Dangerfield demanded perfunctorily. He took back both objects after they had been examined by everyone, and held up the paper so that they could see it. 'This first line, in Latin is simply part of the second verse of the Nineteenth Psalm: *Night unto night sheweth knowledge*. The two references to the Gospels give you the verse: *Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*. I am afraid we can't discover anything from that part of the document. The rest of it seems easier to account for, if I tell you a little more about the paper.'

He put the sheet on his knee and leaned back in his chair as though tired.

'You see the rough sketch of the chess-board,' he went on after a moment or two. 'That gives the position in which the pieces were found on this board here after his death. Possibly it represents the end-position in that game during which the quarrel arose between him and his opponent. He must have attached some importance to it himself, for he came into this room just before going off to his duel, jotted the thing

down, and left orders that it was to be given to his son if anything happened. That, I must admit, seems to suggest that he was not quite in a normal frame of mind when he put the thing on paper for at that date my father was a boy of four or five years old. We Dangerfields are a very late-marrying family for some reason or other. Obviously a child of that age could have no interest in chess-endings. Put that together with the three texts, and I believe the normal mind would say that my grandfather's brain was still bemused with his night's wine—he drank an enormous quantity of port they say—and that in a muddled-headed way he scribbled down this end-game, added one or two of his favourite texts and then with some idea that the texts might be of service to his son he left directions for the paper to be handed on.

He glanced amiably round the circle to see if they shared this view.

Unfortunately,' he continued, 'that explanation falls short of completeness on one matter. This little leather disc was also to be handed to my father. Wasn't a toy that he had made for the boy? Perhaps he had promised it to the child, and even at that dangerous moment he remembered his promise. I like to think that there was something of the kind in his mind. But if there had been any promise of the sort, my father had forgotten it. When they questioned him he knew nothing about it. Quite possibly it was a promised toy. You know what the memory of a four-year-old is like and how difficult it is to catch hold of something which he has once allowed to slip. Nothing came of it.'

His fingers played almost affectionately with the wrinkled scrap of leather.

'My grandfather's death left my father an orphan for his mother had died a year or two earlier. The paper was preserved and handed to my father, when he came of age, by the lawyer of our family who had impounded it shortly after its discovery. It meant nothing to anyone. Whatever

meaning it carried had been lost. All that it meant to my father was the last link with his Corinthian ancestor, and I believed that he preserved it on that account. At any rate, it found its way into the Dangerfield archives, and there it is likely to remain.

'And you, yourself, haven't any idea about it, Mr Dangerfield?' asked Eileen. 'Surely he must have had something in his mind when he wrote it. Tell us what you think of it, if you can.'

'I can give you a guess,' said old Dangerfield, 'but it's a guess and nothing more. My own view is that the quarrel had arisen over some question of their play, and my grandfather wanted a permanent record left, so as to be able to prove his point in cold blood later on. In addition to being a gambler and one of the most remarkable spendthrifts of his day, he was an obstinate man. We know that to our cost. The Dangerfield jewels used to be a very fine collection, but after his death it was found that most of the good things had vanished—converted into cash and rambled away in backing that obstinate opinion of his. After a couple of generations we're still suffering from the inroads he made into the estate.'

'Is anything more known about him?' asked Westenhanger.

'Not very much that's creditable, I'm afraid. Oh, yes! I believe that he made himself rather ridiculous by an improvement of the hobby-horse.'

'He must have been a rum bird!' commented Westenhanger.

Rollo Dangerfield hastened to explain.

'Not a rocking-horse. I mean that two-wheeled thing like a safety bicycle that some of the Corinthians used to amuse themselves with. One sat in the saddle and pushed the thing along with one's feet on the ground—like running in a chair, rather. It had a vogue at one time. I'm told that he brought out a new pattern with treadles—something like the present

child's scooter in principle. At any rate, it was rather frowned on, and he was glad to let it drop. But you see that he was evidently akin to you on one side at least.'

'Now there's just one other thing I'd like to hear about, if you can tell us, Mr. Dangerfield.' Lileen Cressage looked rather doubtfully at the old man as she spoke. 'Perhaps I'm indiscreet, and if I am please say so at once. People talk about the Dangerfield Secret. They say it's something like the one in that Scots family up in the north—you know the thing the heir is told when he's twenty-one. Is there really a Dangerfield secret?'

Old Rollo Dangerfield's face hardened perceptibly for a moment, and he looked at the girl with an inscrutable expression. Then, evidently reading in her face a fear that she had offended him, he relaxed his attitude slightly and tried to put her at her ease again. Nevertheless, the tone of his voice was sufficient to show that he disliked the subject.

There is something which people call the Dangerfield Secret. Helga doesn't know it. She'll be told when she's twenty-five. My nephew Eric knows it, since he's the next male heir. I can say no more about it.'

Westenhanger relieved the slight strain that followed by getting up and stepping across to the Talisman's case.

'I suppose you put this in the safe each night, Mr. Dangerfield? It would hardly do to leave it exposed like this for anyone to pick up. It must be worth a small fortune.'

Old Dangerfield looked across the room.

It was valued last in my grandfather's time, and they put it down as being worth some £50,000 then. The diamonds were said to be very fine, and you can see the size of the stones for yourself.'

'I don't think I'd trust it in a small safe like that, if it were mine,' said Westenhanger, glancing at the little iron door from which Rollo Dangerfield had taken the document. 'Any man with a pocket crow-bar could open that thing and get away with the Talisman.'

The old man laughed shortly.

'Don't trouble about the safe. The Talisman is never put into that. The fact is, you have come up against another of the Dangerfield superstitions. The Talisman is never moved from its place by day or night. It stands where you see it, always.'

The American sat up suddenly.

'You leave it there, sir.' You take no precautions against crooks.' You don't mean to tell me anyone could step in here, lift that bell, and clear off with the goods.'

He paused as if struck by a thought. Then he continued in another tone.

'I take it that you're fully covered by insurance.'

Rollo Dangerfield's face took on a faintly sardonic expression. He seemed to enjoy surprising the American.

Not at all. The Talisman has never been insured. Why should we insure it? It always comes back. We have electric alarms on all the outer doors and the windows, of course, but they are merely put on because my wife is nervous. The Talisman can look after itself. I assure you.'

Wrixall looked at his host in amazement.

'Do you really mean that?'

He thought for a moment, and then a fresh idea seemed to strike him.

'Now I see! You've got some medieval mantrap or spring-gun attached to the thing, something that grips you burglar if he comes after your property.'

Rollo Dangerfield's laugh was quite free from sarcasm; he evidently enjoyed the jest which he alone could see.

'No, Mr. Wrixall, nary a spring-gun, as I believe some of your compatriots might say. Not so much as a mantrap. You could lift the thing from its bed at any hour of the day or night without the slightest risk. My nephew Eric has rooms in the tower above us, but even if he heard you, I doubt if he would trouble to interrupt you. We know our Talisman. It always comes home.'

The American was plainly astounded

'It seems to me, Mr Dangerfield, that you're presuming a good deal on your safety in the past. Crooks nowadays aren't likely to be frightened off by talk. No, it would take more than a Castle Spectre to keep some of our smashers out of here if they only knew what you've told us.'

Rollo Dangerfield's white eyebrows contracted slightly. It was evident to them all that he was displeased at being doubted. He leaned forward and spoke directly to the American.

Now this is authentic. Mr Wraxall. You can look up the accounts in the local papers of the time if you care to go to the trouble. I shall be very pleased to give you the dates, if necessary. At least twice within the last half century an attempt has been made to rob us of the Talisman. Once a drunken tramp made his way in here during the night and took the amulet. He was afraid to get rid of it anywhere near here and three days later he was arrested for some other crime, the Talisman was found on him and returned to us. The second case was a genuine burglary. One of the keepers saw the man leave the house and gave chase. The fellow dropped dead—heart failure it was said to be—and the Talisman was found in his hand.'

The American said nothing, but quite obviously he was not convinced. Old Dangerfield seemed to be nettled.

'I am not trying to convince you, Mr Wraxall. I suppose that would be quite impossible. But I tell you this frankly. If the Talisman disappeared to-night the last thing I should think of doing would be to call in the police. The Talisman guards itself. Within seven days at the outside, it would be back there under the bell.'

Lilcen Cressage had been listening eagerly to the old man's words, but at this last statement her surprise broke.

'You wouldn't call in the police, Mr Dangerfield? You'd really trust to the Talisman finding its way home? It seems amazing.'

'You may take me at my word, Miss Cressage. I mean exactly what I say in this matter. If the Talisman disappeared, either by day or by night, I should not trouble to call in police assistance. Why should I, when I know what I do know? Of course I mean what I say. Did you ever see anything like the Talisman guarded with so little care? If I did not believe implicitly that it would come back, wouldn't I have it trenched round with all manner of protections? Of course! Let it go! What does that matter, since it is certain to be over there again before long.'

Conway Westenhanger turned from the Talisman's niche, but as he crossed the tessellated floor his eye was caught by something which he had not noticed before. He stooped for an instant and glanced keenly at the corners of one or two squares

'Something there that's got plugged with dirt,' he reflected. 'Holes a bit bigger than a large pin's head, they seem to be. Nothing important, evidently, since they're choked up in that fashion.'

Chapter III

FREDDIE STICKNFY owed his presence in the Friocksheim house-party to qualities other than those which make a welcome guest. He was a mean little man, with a skin which invariably proved itself impenetrable to ordinary social pin-pricks; and this thickness of hide enabled him to thrust himself into positions wherein an average individual would have felt too keenly that he was an intruder. He had invited himself, knowing Rollo Dangerfield's dislike for hurting people's feelings and counting on that quality to avoid a refusal, and, having arrived, he proposed to stay for just as long as it suited him to do so. Not that he had any special interest in the Dangerfields. He had angled for three other invitations before turning to Friocksheim as a last resource. However, he was quite prepared to make the most of it, now that he had fixed the thing up. 'Even the best of us,' he reflected philosophically, 'even the best of us have to put up with the second-best at times.' And in this kindly spirit he had come down from town.

Freddie's lack of popularity was due to certain peculiarities in his mind. An acquaintance of his, hard put to it to account for the matter, had explained it thus: 'Freddie's got a certain acuteness. Give him a fact, and he'll worry at it and draw inferences from it. And the funny thing is that every inference he draws tends to discredit somebody or something. And yet he doesn't do it out of malice. It's just Freddie's way. He's got that kind of mind—can't help making people uncomfortable.'

On the afternoon of the day after Rollo Dangerfield had shown the Talisman to his guests, Freddie was lounging on a seat in the garden when one of these inference-bearing facts crossed his mind.

'Why,' he said to himself, 'now that Westenhanger's gone to town, we shall be thirteen at table to-night. That's very thoughtless of the Dangerfields. Out of thirteen people there's certain to be at least one person who's superstitious. That'll be most uncomfortable for everybody. I think I'd better mention it before we sit down.'

As it chanced he had not to wait so long before announcing his discovery. Before he had finished a mental analysis of the probable distribution of superstition among his fellow-guests Mrs. Dangerfield came into view, armed with gloves and scissors. Freddie rose and joined her.

'Going to cut some flowers?' he inquired. 'May I help?'

Mrs. Dangerfield refused his assistance, but Freddie was not to be shaken off.

'Friend of mine once suffered badly. Tore his finger with a thorn, then let some dirt into it. Charles's fellow he was, poor chap. It suppurated, swelled up, they had to take the finger off at last.'

Mrs. Dangerfield deliberately put on her gardening gloves.

'I don't think I shall run much risk in these. Mr. Stickney.'

No? Perhaps not. Still one never can tell, you know. A single prick from a rose thorn would be enough.

Mrs. Dangerfield laughed.

'You must be a terribly thoughtful person to live with.'

Freddie considered this for a moment.

'No. Just a knack I have of seeing a thing and knowing how it happens. That reminds me—we shall be thirteen at table to-night. Don't mind myself of course, and I'm sure you don't mind either—but some of the people might. You know. It's awkward.'

'I shouldn't trouble about it. Mr. Stickney. As a matter of fact, I remembered it yesterday and rang up Mrs. Tuxford. She and the doctor will dine with us to-night. So no one's feelings will be ruffled. And of course we never have a full party at lunch. Is your mind relieved?'

Mrs Dangerfield did not like Freddie Stickney

'But what about breakfast to-morrow?' pursued the indefatigable inquirer 'They might happen to turn up all at the same time'

'Mrs Brent always breakfasts in her own room,' said Mrs Dangerfield who was tired of the subject 'I'm sorry. I have some orders to give to this gardener'

Dismissed in this summary fashion, Freddie Stickney wandered about the grounds until it was time to go into the house and dress. He was feeling rather bored. Fricksheim might be cheaper than the Continent, but undeniably it was slow. Nothing happened at Fricksheim. These people seemed to have no interest in scandal. He began to wish that something would turn up to liven things a little. He had had some hopes of Morchard at first. The mottle-faced fellow seemed to be keen on the girls, and anything might turn up. But none of the girls seemed interested in Morchard. Nor did they seem fascinated by Freddie himself. A slow place, decidedly slow. He was thoughtful while he dressed. If the Dangerfield circle was going to turn out so boring he might be forced to leave earlier than he had intended, but that would mean paying hotel bills somewhere, and Freddie's frugal mind could hardly bring itself to consider that prospect except as a last resort.

After dinner the party split up. Douglas Faumile, complaining bitterly of the heat and clamouring for fresh air, easily persuaded Cynthia to follow him out into the gardens. Old Dangerfield impressed Freddie Stickney to make up a bridge tour with Nina Lindale and the doctor's wife. As they sat down Mrs Tuxford put in a plea for small stakes.

'What do you call "small stakes"?' demanded Freddie. 'As low as ten bob a hundred.' 'They're playing their usual points at the other table, I think.'

He glanced over his shoulder as he spoke, and noted that Mrs Caistor, Scorton and Morchard were playing against Eric Dangerfield and Eileen.

The doctor's wife, a shy-looking girl, seemed taken aback by Freddie's ideas.

'I simply can't afford to play for anything higher than a shilling a hundred,' she said, ignoring Freddie's ill-suppressed astonishment at the figure. 'I'm sorry, but there it is.'

Rollo Dangerfield winced under Freddie's tactlessness. He knew that the doctor's practice was a very small one: and he admired the girl for having the grit to keep the stakes down.

'Quite right,' he interjected, swiftly, before Freddie could say anything further, 'I agree with you, Mrs. Tuxford. A shilling a hundred suits well enough if one's keen on the game for its own sake. I'd much rather play with people who want to win a rubber than with other people who only want to win a sovereign.'

'I'm quite pleased to play for a shilling a hundred,' said Nina Lindale.

Freddie could take a hint as well as most people. His eyes opened a little wider, but nothing else showed whether he was pleased or displeased. As the game began, the doctor came across the room and glanced at his wife's hand.

Mrs. Brent, feeling the thunderous closeness of the night, had made her way to a chair beside one of the deep windows; and leaning back in it she tried to persuade herself that she felt a breath of cooler air. Wraxall and Mrs. Dangerfield followed her, and they were joined almost immediately by the doctor. Helga Dangerfield circled round the two tables, halting for a moment or two to scan the cards. Then, saying she had some letters to write, she left the room.

'The storm must be coming to-night,' Mrs. Brent asserted, as a faint puff of sultry air momentarily stirred the curtain beside her. 'It's been banking up all day; and I'm sure it can't keep off much longer. I can feel all my nerves atwitch.'

Wraxall bent forward in his chair and scanned the heavy clouds.

'I'm not up in your weather-signs,' he said, 'but it does seem to me that there's a shake-up coming. I should certainly judge we'd have rain soon. I should say we're in for a regular waterspout if those clouds burst overhead. It will be wet.'

The doctor was examining Mrs. Brent's face with an interest more friendly than professional.

'Nerves?' he asked kindly.

She nodded.

'A dose of bromide? Quieten them, and give you a chance to get to sleep. I can take my car down and make it up for you in ten minutes, if you'd like it.'

Mrs. Brent thanked him with a smile; but she nodded dissent to his suggestion.

'No,' she answered, 'I don't believe in running away from things. I loathe thunder; but I'm not so feeble as all that. I'd much rather take it as it comes.'

The doctor was about to say something when she stopped him with a gesture and bent forward to the window, listening intently.

'What bird was that?' she asked.

'I heard nothing,' said the doctor.

'Listen!' She motioned for silence, and they sat with ears strained. 'There! Didn't you hear it?'

'No, nothing,' said the American.

'There it is again!' Mrs. Brent held up her hand for a moment. 'It's stopped now. Didn't you hear it, Anne?'

Mrs. Dangerfield shook her head.

'You always forget that the rest of us aren't gifted with super-normal hearing, you know.'

'Well, I heard it quite distinctly. It's down yonder in the trees near the Pool, I think.'

'Nobody else heard it, at any rate,' said the doctor. 'You must have remarkably sharp ears, Mrs. Brent. Now I begin

to see why you dislike thunder so much. It must be a perfect torture to a person with your acute hearing. I withdraw my suggestion about a sedative. Nothing short of morphia would keep you asleep in a storm, I'm afraid.'

'Well, I haven't come to that yet,' Mrs. Brent retorted. 'And I prefer to keep what nerves I have, rather than wreck them further with drugs. One can always stand a thing if one makes up one's mind to it.'

'One thing I won't stand,' said Mrs. Dangerfield, 'and that's the heat of this room. Let's go outside and see if we can't find a cooler spot to sit.'

The doctor rose and followed her as she crossed the room, but Mrs. Brent seemed to reject the idea. She remained in her chair and Wixall, after rising, sat down again. For a time Mrs. Brent remained silent, gazing out at the inky sky, but at last she turned to the American.

'Well, Mr. Wixall,' she demanded in a low voice which could not reach the bridge players, 'Are you still confident of getting what you want?'

The American's face betrayed nothing of his thoughts.

'I couldn't say. No, it's too early yet to say. I'll admit that it's a stiffer thing than I expected. It's certainly stiffer than I supposed. But I haven't tried to get it yet. I think I'll wait till I have tried, before I say what I think. But I thank you for what you told me. I take that kindly of you. If you'd said nothing, I'd have made a mistake, likely enough. I hadn't quite a grip of the situation, I'll say that frankly.'

Mrs. Brent scanned his imperturbable features for a moment and then changed the subject.

'Rather a contrast between those two bridge-tables over there. Mrs. Tuxford plays well, but she kept the stakes down. The play at the other table seems to me little better than gambling. I've heard "Redouble" twice in the last round or two, and Miss Cressage isn't half as good at bridge as Mrs. Tuxford.'

Wraxall looked at her with a faint admiration showing on his face

'You don't miss much Mrs Brent That's a fact I've been watching them play, but it hadn't struck me You're quite right But I suppose they can stand it'

'I suppose so No business of mine' retorted Mr Brent, shortly

She turned slightly round in her chair however, and studied the face of the players at Lilien's table Things were going very badly for the girl She was the worst of the four and in addition, her nerve was going, and her play was growing more and more reckless That night she had sat down with the pleasant feeling that in an hour or two she would have won something more towards the payment of the bills which still hung over her But somehow this evening, things were different Instead of Conway Weston's anger she had Eric Dangerfield as a partner and without quite realising what the change meant she had found that the games did not run so smoothly as they had done on the night before Once or twice she had misdealt and her partner had left her to fend for herself A run of bad cards had taken still further into her nerve

And then suddenly she had realised how much she had already lost and she had begun to play more wildly in the hope of recouping herself The gains of the previous evening were gone by now and she was steadily running up a score against herself She began to feel the heat of the night and her play became more erratic

Mrs Brent studied her face for a round or two without comment Then she turned to the American with an expression which might almost have been an ill-concealed sneer

'If either of us was a philanthropist Mr Wraxall, I think we could find a field for our talents by persuading that girl to stop before she makes matters worse She's making a fool of herself

'I judge so from her looks I don't play bridge It seems to me to lack the complete psychological satisfaction that poker gives And it hasn't the swiftness of faro It's too slow and not brainy enough I regard it as a dud game'

Mrs Brent turned her back to the bridge-table

'Well, if we worried ourselves about other people's troubles we should have a full life of it' she said 'As I told you the other night, I'm not a professing philanthropist'

The American made no direct reply

'You've got a headache?' he asked

'Frightful It's the storm, I think'

'I judged so from your eyes If you'll excuse me, I'll go off and leave you You won't be anxious to talk when you feel that way'

Mrs Brent gloomily acquiesced Waxall rose from his chair and left the room As soon as he had gone she turned again slightly and resumed her study of Lileen Cressage's face The girl was evidently slipping into desperation, and her play had degenerated into mere gambling on long chances Once or twice she won heavily, but the run of luck was persistently against her Mrs Brent shifted her attention to Eric Dangerfield's face, and from it she could learn that he was growing uneasy Once or twice he endeavoured to take the play out of his partner's hands, but he had nothing like the skill of Conway Westenhanger More often than not, his attempts at rescue ended in worse disaster Occasionally he glanced at the score and knitted his brows, but his play continued steady He had not lost his nerve like the girl

After a final disastrous round the bridge-party completed the rubber and came to a close Mrs Brent saw Lileen Cressage lean over and watch Morchard as he added up the long array of figures, and the girl's perturbation at the sight of the scoring-block was written plainly in her face Morchard was slow in arithmetic, and as he laboriously totted up column after column, the distress deepened and the girl

went white. At last he jotted down the total and worked out the cash equivalent.

'That's —let's see—two hundred and six pounds eighteen isn't it?' he said, putting down the scoring-block and pencil.

'What did you say?' I didn't quite catch, said Eileen. 'Two hundred pounds!' She knew they had been losing steadily, but this was far beyond her worst anticipations. She couldn't possibly pay that, even if she were given a year to do it. What had persuaded her to play at all? She felt her throat dry and mechanically moistened her lips.

'Two hundred and six pound eighteen I make it,' repeated Morchard. 'Not bad partner.'

Mrs. Caistor Scorton glanced keenly at the girl's face.

'Well,' she said, shortly, pushing her chair back slightly as though to show that the time had come to settle.

Eileen pulled herself together with an effort.

'I'm afraid I haven't enough money to pay just now,' she said. 'I suppose you won't mind letting it stand over for a little?'

Mrs. Caistor Scorton brought her eyes back to Eileen's face. Her thin lips were compressed for a moment, and when he spoke her voice was hard.

'I always settle my own bridge debts immediately, and I expect other people to do the same.'

Eileen flushed. After all, she had had fair warning. Mrs. Caistor Scorton had said the same thing the night before, when she had been the loser.

'I'm sorry, but I haven't as much money as that on hand.'

Mrs. Caistor Scorton reflected for a moment.

'Well, you can give me a cheque if you like,' she conceded. 'But, frankly, I prefer to keep these things on a cash basis always. It's a fad of mine, and I don't like to break my rule.'

The ungraciousness of the tone was evident, but Eileen cared little for that. All she wanted was to escape the humiliation of a public explanation. A cheque would fur-

nish a way out of present difficulties. She could hand it over, and then, later on, she could explain the state of affairs to her creditor without an embarrassing audience.

'Wait a moment and I'll get my cheque-book,' she said, rising from her chair. As she turned, she noticed Morchard's eyes fixed upon her and there seemed to be something speculative in his gaze. In his glance she read that he understood the state of affair perfectly, but she saw no sign of sympathy in his face. Instead, there seemed to be calculation.

She climbed the great staircase, traversed the long corridor which ran at the back of the main building, and turned down the passage leading to her own room in the rear of the house. In a moment or two she had found her cheque-book, scribbled a cheque, and was back in the drawing-room. So eager was she to avoid an argument in public that she hardly gave a thought to the possible results of her action.

'£206 18s —is that right?' she asked, passing the slip of paper across to Mrs. Causton Scorton.

Mrs. Scorton picked up the cheque, glanced at its face to make sure that it was in order, and then put it away. Eric Dangerfield watched her with an uncomfortable expression; then he turned to his other opponent.

'Give you a cheque if you don't mind, Morchard,' he said. 'I'll let you have it to-night or to-morrow —now if you're anxious.'

Morchard was still studying Laken's face.

'Oh, any time will do,' he said absently. 'There's no hurry.'

The second bridge-table completed a rubber and the players rose from their seats. Mrs. Bient, in her turn, left her chair and approached the group.

'I think it's growing closer every minute,' she said. 'Would anyone care to walk in the gardens for a while? I'm going out.'

Morchard seized on the suggestion.

'That's a good idea. Care to come down to the Pool, Miss Cressage?' It's sure to be cooler there, beside the water.'

The girl assented listlessly. Her mind was still busy with the disaster of the evening. What a fool she had been! But calling herself names would hardly help now. She would have to find some way out of the affair, and the raising of £200 was beyond her resources completely. Perhaps Mrs. Caistor Scorton wasn't so bad as she seemed. Possibly she might turn out to be rather a decent person, these surface-hard people often were like that. Of course the money would have to be found eventually, but if time were given, something might be done.

The group moved out on to the terrace in front of the house. Freddie Stickney attached himself to Nina Lindale and they went off together down into the gardens. Eric Dangerfield, looking worried, approached his uncle, and they followed the other two. Morchard and Lileen descended the steps and turned off into one of the side-alleys. Mrs. Brent turned to the remaining two.

'Mr. Morchard's quite right, I think,' she said. 'If there's any coolness to be had to-night, it will be down at the Pool. Shall we go?'

She looked up at the inkv sky with some distrust. Mrs. Caistor Scorton turned back towards the door.

'It looks very like a down-pour,' she reflected. 'I don't think I'll join you. I have to write a note to my bankers and one or two other things, and I may as well do that now.'

'Oh, very well,' said Mrs. Brent placidly. 'Perhaps you're right. Will you risk it, Miss Tuxford?'

They moved off in the track of the two Dangerfields, leaving Mrs. Scorton to return to the house.

'I think we might walk a little faster,' Mrs. Brent suggested in a moment or two. She seemed anxious about something. 'I hate moving about at all on a night like this, but I'd really give a good deal for a breath of fresh air. It's like an oven up there at the house, but down beside the water it

ought to be cooler. Really, if this spell doesn't break soon I shall simply take French leave and go off in the *Kestrel*.'

She pointed towards the bay, where one or two of the yacht's lights flickered upon the water. Mrs. Tuxford nodded understandingly.

'I know how you feel—nerves all ragged. And you've got a headache too. Don't bother to talk. Let's walk along quietly and see if the air about the Pool will do you any good.'

By winding paths they came at last to the edge of the belt of trees which encircled the sheet of water. Just before they emerged from the shadows Mrs. Brent pulled up and glanced round the Pool. On the further bank, some forty yards off, she caught a glimpse of Lilien Cresswell's dress lit up by the moonlight and a flash of Morchard's shirt-front as he turned a little.

'I think well, top,' said Mrs. Brent to her companion. 'It's cool enough here under the trees.'

She fell into a listening attitude.

'Did you hear that bird call?'

Mrs. Tuxford strained her ears but heard nothing. Mrs. Brent excused herself with a gesture.

'I always forget that my hearing is sharp. Can't you even hear those people talking over there? Sound carries far across water.'

Again Mrs. Tuxford listened intently.

'Nothing but a murmur,' she said.

Mrs. Brent held up a finger.

'There! That bird call—lovely. Do you mind if I listen to it?'

Mrs. Tuxford nodded acquiescence and watched her companion listening intently to something which she herself could not catch. Her eyes wandered to the two figures across the Pool, but they were standing half in the shadows and she could make very little of them.

Just at that moment, as it happened, Morchard was

engaged upon a psychological problem very much after his own heart. He had played bridge that evening with a steadily growing satisfaction. To him, Lileen Cressage's face had been an open book, and he had read without difficulty the thoughts which passed through her mind.

'That girl's in difficulties,' he had ruminated as the game progressed. 'I know the signs. She'll not be able to pay. I know the Scorton, she'll want her money. Little Cressage hasn't a blue cent. I like the dark haired, pale-kinned girls especially when they're rather shy, like her.'

The incident of the cheque had been clear as glass.

'The Scorton won't collect much on that, or I'm mistaken. It'll come back with "Refer to Drawer" on it sure enough. And the girl knows it too. She's just staved off trouble for a few hours. That is unless someone else foots the bill. Two hundred's only a flea-bite.'

He had wandered down to the Pool beside Lileen without saying very much. That would give her time to think over things and to realise what a hole she had got herself into. Card-debts were things one simply had to pay. At one point only he had broken the silence and then it was to relate an anecdote of Mrs. Carstor Scorton, an anecdote which brought out to the full the hardness of that lady's character where money was concerned. When they reached the shore, he glanced round to see that no one was within ear-shot. The figures of Mrs. Brent and her companion hidden in the belt of trees, escaped his eye.

'Sorry you had bad luck to-night, Miss Cressage. Cards were rather against you people.'

Lileen Cressage's voice was not quite under control. She tried to steady it and speak lightly.

'I suppose one must expect that now and again.'

'Oh, yes. Your turn last night, ours to-night. Yours again to-morrow night, very likely. We'll give you a chance of your revenge then.'

Lileen thought of her worthless cheque and shivered a

little. No matter how things went, there would be no bridge for her next night.

'I don't think I shall play to-morrow,' she said, hesitatingly. 'I'm rather tired of bridge.'

'Oh! Sorry to hear that. Quite looked forward to it.'

'No; I shan't play any more' She found her lip quivering and stiffened it with an effort. Morchard had caught the movement in her moon-lit face. 'Shall we go back to the house?'

'Wait a moment, Miss Cressage. I've something to say.'

She turned back towards him and he studied her features for a moment; then he continued, as though he had just made a discovery.

'Now I guess what's wrong. I knew something was up. You're hard up? Isn't that it?'

Eileen's face was sufficient answer. Morchard's voice became sympathetic.

'Really hard up? That's beastly.'

Then, watching her keenly, he appeared to make a fresh discovery:

'That cheque you handed over to-night, no good, eh? Overdrawn your account? Well, well.'

He drew closer to the girl

'Look here, Eileen, this is an awkward affair. You've got yourself into a bad hole. I know the Scorton. She'll send that cheque off to-night to her bank—no, first thing to-morrow morning. I could see it in her eye. She suspects it's a dud. And by to-morrow night she'll know it hasn't been met. And then she'll make a row. She'll make the devil of a row. I know her.'

He paused, letting this sink in.

'You'll need to get out of it somehow.'

The girl's defences were down completely. This brute, with his mottled face and close-set eyes, had seen the whole affair. If he knew, everybody else might know also. He had told her nothing she had not guessed for herself; but the

mere putting of it into definite words made it seem a worse business than ever. She made an unconscious gesture, as though trying to ward off the catastrophe. Morchard grew more sympathetic.

'Now, listen, Eileen. There's an easy way out. Two hundred's nothing to me, I can easily spare it. I'll lend it to you. You can pay it back any time you like, I shan't miss it. That's all right now. All your worries over! Come to my room to-night and I'll give you a cheque. You can go up to town to-morrow first thing, and pay it into your bank in time to meet that cheque you gave the Scotton.'

Before the girl could reply Mrs. Brent's voice sounded across the water.

Miss Cresswell!

Eileen started at the call, and, turning, she saw Mrs. Brent and Mr. Tuxford coming from among the trees.

'Thank goodness they're too far off to have heard what we were saying,' she reflected, measuring the distance with her eye.

Then she called in reply, and she was further relieved to find it difficult to make them hear what she said.

'Have you ever seen a glow-worm?' Mrs. Brent's voice came faintly over the Pool. 'Come round and look at this one I've found.'

Eileen turned away from Morchard and made her way round the water's edge to where the two women were standing. Morchard followed her sullenly, his anger at the interruption being evident, though he was doing his best to conceal it.

But when Mrs. Brent led them back into the spinney and tried to point out the glow-worm, it had vanished.

'That's a pity,' she said, glancing side-long at Morchard as she poked. 'I really thought I had it and could pick it up again easily enough.'

She poked about for a moment or two among the grass at the edge of the little wood.

'No, I'm afraid it's escaped. Creatures do get away, unless one keeps an eye on them. And it was such a pretty little thing, too.'

This time her face was in the moonlight, and there was no mistaking the mockery in her expression as she turned to Morchard.

'Well, my headache's a little better. Shall we go back to the house? These wood-paths won't let us walk four abreast, I'm afraid. Mr. Morchard, you and Mrs. Tuxford had better go first.'

She stood aside to let them pass. Then, before following them, she whispered a few words to Ellen. The girl nodded and they went up the path in the track of Morchard and his companion. As they came into the garden, Mrs. Brent noticed Wraxall and old Dangerfield in one of the alleys. The American was talking earnestly, while his host listened to him with his usual polite aloofness. Again Mrs. Brent's face betrayed a flash of mockery, but she made no remark to the girl at her side, and together they passed on towards the house.

She had been quite correct in her reading of the situation. Wraxall, despite her friendly warning, had made up his mind to approach their host with a direct offer for the Dangerfield Talisman. He had shown considerable tact in his manner of introducing the subject, for Mrs. Brent's hints had not been lost upon him. But just as she had predicted, he met with an uncompromising refusal.

'Part with our Talisman, Mr. Wraxall? It's out of the question!'

The American tried to work round the flank of the defence.

'One moment, Mr. Dangerfield, before you make up your mind definitely. Perhaps I could say something to alter your views. I'm a collector. I'm not the keeper of a public museum. I want your Talisman for its own sake. I want it for itself and for myself. I shouldn't put it in a show-case

with a ticket on it. No one would know that you had transferred it. The matter would be entirely between ourselves — completely private.’

Rollo Dangerfield halted for a moment in his stride.

‘And how would you propose to account for its disappearance from Friocksheim then?’ Anyone looking at our empty cabinet would know that it had gone.’

Wraxall had his solution ready.

‘A replica, of course. That could be made in a few days, by these modern electro-plating methods, and paste stones could be put in instead of the real ones. It would serve well enough. It wouldn’t be spotted. Mr Dangerfield, if you kept it out of people’s hands. You’d never talk, I wouldn’t talk, no one would ever know.’

Rollo Dangerfield turned in the moonlight.

‘That’s a very ingenious idea, Mr Wraxall. But the Talisman is not for sale.’

The American apparently had not quite given up his project.

‘Well, think it over,’ he begged. ‘No one would ever know. It would only be a case of borrowing the Talisman for a day or two, to get the replica made. Then you put the replica into the cabinet. I get the Talisman, and nobody’s any the wiser. Think it over again.’

Rollo Dangerfield seemed deep in thought. He made no reply, and they walked on once more. On the horizon a faint flicker of sheet lightning illumined the sky, heralding the coming storm. As they turned back towards Friocksheim, the moon slipped behind the edge of the thunder-cloud.

Chapter IV

DOUGLAS FAIRMILF coming down to breakfast next morning found Nina and Cynthia already at table

'Good morning, Douglas' Cynthia greeted him 'You don't seem quite your usual bright self to-day. A trifle heavy-eyed and even duller-looking than usual. Did the thunder keep you awake?'

'Rather! My sensitive temperament you know. High strung and all that. The last thing put me off my sleep.'

Cynthia looked him over with mock sympathy.

'Ah! Nevertheless no doubt. It hard lines on these healthy-looking people. Nina then nerves are all fiddle-strings really, but they get no sympathy because they look so frightfully robust. Observe, however, the leaden eye, the trembling hand. He'll be biting a bit out of his tea-cup if we don't manage to soothe him.'

'I'd just love to have you for a nurse if I went sick,' Douglas affirmed. 'And the more please since you happen to be so handy to it. Thanks. I suppose the storm passed quite unnoticed at your end of the house.'

'No, indeed,' Nina said nervously. 'It gave me the fright of my life. I had to creep away to Cynthia's room for comfort. I hate thunder, especially when it comes near.'

'It was near enough last night. One of the trees in the garden was struck. You can see it from the door.'

'That must have been the peal that drove me out of my wits, then. I knew it was close at hand.'

'Well, it's cleared the air, that's one good thing,' said Douglas, glancing through the window at the big white clouds sailing in the blue. 'All the stuffiness has gone now.'

This is going to be a day for careful enjoyment, too good to waste on mere reckless frivolity'

He looked sternly at Cynthia

'I do love Frocksheim' said Nina, irrelevantly 'It's a place where one can do just as one likes and no one bothers about things'

What about borrowing the *Kestrel* and going up the coast until the afternoon' suggested Cynthia 'Mrs Brent would let us have it if we asked her'

Douglas glanced again through the window

Hullo! She's gone!

'What a nuisance!' Cynthia looked over the empty waters of the bay Mrs Brent said something last night about going off in the yacht, but I didn't think she meant it She's evidently taken the *Kestrel* herself though That notion's knocked on the head

The door opened to admit Freddie Stickney Even as he came in they could see that he was preparing a sensation for them His prying little eyes ran over the group, estimating the character of his audience

Heard the latest he demanded importantly

Spare us the usual preliminary 'Freddie' Douglas implored 'Don't draw out the agony Flop right in at the deep end If it's an earthquake in Frocksheim or any other little thing like that why just give us the simple tale in the fewest words

Freddie Stickney seemed to feel that his sensation was big enough to let him follow Douglas's advice He came to the point without more ado

The Talisman's been stolen he announced with a certain undercurrent of malicious enjoyment in his voice 'That's a pretty knock for the Dangerfield

For a moment his three hearers failed to take in his news

The Talisman?' exclaimed Nina 'You don't mean to say somebody's taken it?'

Freddy confirmed his statement with a smile

'Are you sure about this, Freddie, or is it just some rot you're making up?' demanded Douglas.

'Quite sure about it. I've been to look at the cabinet where it's kept, to make certain, and it's gone. No sign of it.'

Cynthia looked distressed.

'That's a bad business, isn't it? Poor Mr. Dangerfield! The Talisman's the thing he values most in the world, I should think. He'll be fearfully cut up.'

'Oh, he'll be all that,' agreed Freddie, unsympathetically. 'But it's a beastly nuisance. Triocksheim will be swarming with police and detectives—probably unofficial 'tees as well. The Dangerfields will do anything to get the thing back again, you can bet. It'll be most unpleasant for all of us. They'll expect us to turn out our suit-cases to see that none of us has taken it.'

'Well, what's the harm in that?' inquired Cynthia. 'They can do what they like, so far as I'm concerned. The main thing is to get the thing back again. I suppose they'll get it back in a day or two.'

Douglas looked doubtful.

'Depends who's taken it, Cynthia. There's no saying. But perhaps it hasn't been stolen at all,' he ended, hopefully. 'It may just have been taken away to be cleaned or something like that.'

'Wrong, there,' said Freddie, with a self-satisfied air. 'It's been stolen. I managed to worm that out of the butler.'

'Oh, did you?' Douglas's expression showed what he thought of Freddie's methods.

'Yes. At least, I got enough from him to put two and two together. There's been a theft of some sort, whether it was burglary or stealing from inside the house.'

'What a horrible business!' Nina was evidently upset by the affair. 'It'll be a terrible shock for the Dangerfields, won't it? I do hope they get it back again almost at once. I wish it hadn't happened. I do wish it hadn't happened!'

Freddie stared at her in a patronising way.

'I shouldn't worry over it. It's really the Dangerfields' own fault for taking no precautions. Fancy leaving the thing standing about in that open cabinet ready for anyone to lift! One can't have much sympathy with them, after all.'

'I think I can spare a little,' Cynthia commented, icily.

Freddie had a further tit-bit which he had held in reserve.

'Oh I don't think so,' he said. 'Why they never took the trouble to insure the thing. That's inexcusable carelessness. Really they seem to deserve all they've got.'

Douglas leaned forward in surprise.

'Do you mean to say, Freddie, that the thing wasn't insured?'

'So I believe,' asserted Freddie. 'I got it out of the butler before he realised what he was saying.'

Douglas passed this explanation without comment.

'Why the thing's impossible! The stones in the Talisman are worth more than £50,000. Nobody would dream of keeping a thing like that uninsured!'

'Well you'll find I'm right,' said Freddie weightily. 'And that's why we shall be flooded out with police and detectives. Obviously they've surely got to get it back. Nobody cares to lose £50,000.'

Nina was fully taken aback by the figure.

'I should think not. I'd no idea it was worth so much. What a loss for poor Mr. Dangerfield.'

'Well, he'll have to stand it if the thing isn't recovered,' said Freddie, philosophically.

'It makes me frightfully nervous,' admitted Nina. 'Just think Cynthia, that burglar may have been prowling about near us in the night. It gives me the creeps!'

'Oh, that's all over now,' Cynthia soothed her. 'You're too nervous, Nina. If it has been a burglar, he's not in the least likely to come back again. You can sleep quite quietly so far as that goes.'

Freddie hastened to play the part of consoler

'I don't think you need worry. There's nothing much else in the house. The Dangerfields haven't a big stock of jewellery. The Talisman was about the only thing worth taking in the whole place.'

'Well, I'm ever so sorry about it,' Nina reaffirmed. 'It makes everything different to-day. I nockshum won't be the same with this hanging over it. How could one enjoy oneself when this has happened?'

'Oh, one does what one can. Freddie reassured her. 'Worrying won't help.'

'That's right, Freddie commented. Douglas contemptuously, 'Have your principles and act accordingly! The stern unbending Remin touch eh?

'Where's Mrs. Caistor Scotton?' inquired Freddie.

He was evidently anxious to find a fresh Auditor for this news.

'She was just finishing her breakfast when I came down,' volunteered Nina. 'I think he's gone out.'

Freddie was plainly disappointed by this information.

'She must have been down a good deal earlier than usual,' he grumbled. 'Where's Wraxall?

'Not down yet,' said Douglas. 'I expect the town kept him awake like the rest of us, and he's been put in some extra sleep. He'll be down later on.'

He glanced at the two girls, and all three rose.

'Well, ta-ta, Freddie. We're leaving you in the best of company, so you'll excuse us if we go.'

Freddie's expression showed that he saw the irony without appreciating it.

'See you later,' he snapped, going on with his breakfast as the others filed out of the room.

On that day Wraxall awoke later than usual and dressed with a certain leisureliness. He had been about during the small hours of the morning, and even after he went to bed, some time had elapsed before he managed to fall asleep. On

reaching the breakfast-room at last, he was not altogether pleased to find Freddie Stickney the only other occupant

'Thunder keep you awake too' demanded Freddie, as Wraxall took his seat 'Cleared the air, anyway That's one blessing'

'I sat up and watched the storm' said the American, shortly

'Frightful racket, wasn't it' Freddie inquired

Wraxall nodded vaguely and attacked his breakfast

'Heard the great news' persisted Freddie, not to be balked

Wraxall who preferred to breakfast peacefully looked across the table with an expression of the very faintest interest

'News?' he asked 'No I haven't seen a paper yet My doctor tells me it's better to read later on He advises me to concentrate at breakfast-time I shun his views I believe he's right'

Freddie ignored the hint

Oh it's not in the papers It's a Locksheim tidbit, exclusive The Dangerfield Talisman's been stolen'

If he expected to read anything in the American's face he was disappointed Wraxall's lean countenance betrayed no emotion of any sort not even surprise He continued to masticate stolidly for a few moments, as though excluding all extraneous ideas Freddie felt that a good item of news had been wasted

'How do you know it's been stolen' inquired Wraxall, at length

'Well it's gone at any rate'

Wraxall glanced across the table

'That's hardly the same thing Mr Stickney If I drop a dollar in the street without noticing it, the dollar's gone, but it isn't necessarily stolen When I send a clock to be cleaned, it's gone too but the clock-maker isn't a thief for all that Let's be accurate, if you please

This was hardly the reception Freddie had anticipated. 'Well, it's gone, at any rate,' he repeated. 'And if it's gone, somebody must have taken it. It didn't walk off by itself. And if anybody took it, that's theft, isn't it?'

Wraxall appeared to consider this proposition with some care before replying.

'No,' he replied after a pause. 'No. I'd hardly care to go as far as that. Hardly. Mr. Rollo Dangerfield may have taken it—that wouldn't be theft, since it belongs to him. Somebody may have borrowed it—borrowing isn't theft. No, it seems to me you're rather apt to jump to conclusions, Mr. Stickney. I can't follow you to that length.'

Freddie Stickney flushed slightly. This confounded Yank was evidently presuming to pull his leg. Freddie contented himself with a reiteration of his former remark.

'Well, it's gone—at any rate.'

As he said it his eyes swept the American's face, and for an instant he seemed to catch a glimpse of something going on behind the mask. Wraxall was evidently perturbed, and his eyes showed that he was thinking hard, though his face gave no clue to the subject which occupied him.

Freddie relapsed for a time into sulkily silence, and Wraxall was able to continue his meal undisturbed. From time to time Freddie's beady eyes ranged round to the American's face, but its set expression betrayed nothing to him. Freddie began to contrast the reception which Wraxall had given to his news with the outburst of sympathy for the Dangerfields which had come from Douglas and the girls.

'Something very fishy about this fellow,' he thought to himself. 'One would almost think it wasn't news to him at all. And why is he so anxious to make out that it isn't a case of theft? That's very rum.'

Freddie chewed the cud of this idea for a minute or two, but at last, feeling the lack of conversation to be too great a strain, he tried another opening.

'Very few at breakfast to-day.'

The American glanced round the empty table, but made no audible comment

'Three of the party went off first thing this morning,' Freddie continued 'Mrs Brent's away in the *Kestrel*. Didn't wait to say good-bye to me'

At last a gleam of interest crossed the American's face

'Mrs Brent's gone? Now I'm sorry to hear that, Mr Stickney. I shall miss her. She's a most understanding person. I'm sorry. But perhaps she's only gone for the day?'

Freddie Stickney had to admit ignorance

'She didn't leave any message about when she'd be back. And I don't think a message went off by the first train. But she'll be back to-night most likely. So will young Dangerfield. He's gone too.'

Wraxall nodded but said nothing. Freddie was emboldened to proceed

'Funny—their going just when the Talisman's disappeared—isn't it? The Dangerfield Luck gone and all of them clear out at once. Like rats leaving a sinking ship, what? It seems rum, doesn't it?'

The American's brief spell of interest in Freddie's conversation came abruptly to an end. This time there was no doubt about it. Freddie's latest news item must have started a fresh train of thought in Wraxall's mind, and he was devoting his whole attention to following it out. Freddie attempted to break in once or twice, but received no encouragement beyond absent-minded nods which might have meant anything, so at last he rose and left the room.

Chapter V

AFTER Freddie Stickney had closed the door behind him, Wraxall frankly abandoned any pretence of being interested in his food. He pushed back his chair slightly and seemed to concentrate his whole mind for a time upon some intricate problem.

'I'd better see the old man as soon as I can,' he said, half aloud at one point in his train of thought. 'The first thing to do is to see how the land lies. It's a tight position.'

But a final solution of his problem evidently evaded him, and when he got up and went in search of his host it was clear that he still remained in doubt about something.

'I'll get it over at least,' he said to himself.

In spite of his age, Rollo Dangerfield was an early riser, compared with some of his guests. He had breakfasted an hour before, and Wraxall found him in the morning room, engrossed in a newspaper. As his guest came in, Rollo put the sheet aside and looked up.

'Terrible storm last night, Mr. Wraxall. I hope it didn't keep you awake through half the night.'

'I like storms,' the American assured him. 'I sat up a good part of the night to watch that one. It would have been a pity to miss it. I enjoyed it—immensely. The effects were very fine at times, Mr. Dangerfield, very fine indeed. A magnificent spectacle.'

Rollo Dangerfield seemed relieved that his guest had suffered no inconvenience.

'I wish everybody could say the same,' he said. 'Poor Mrs. Brent didn't share your enthusiasm, I'm afraid. She's peculiarly sensitive to electrical conditions—a'ways has been so. Her nerves seem to go all to pieces in a storm, and I think

that one last night affected her badly. She went off in the *Kestrel* this morning before any of us were up, and I expect she'll stay away until she gets back to normal again.'

The American paused a moment or two before replying.

'I'm sorry to hear that. She didn't strike me as a nervous type. I should have said she was very well balanced, if you'd asked my opinion.'

'Each of us has his own special weakness,' said the old man, phlegmatically. 'Some people can't stand cats, for some reason. I dislike house-spiders intensely myself, though I can't give you any grounds for my aversion. In Mrs. Brent's case, it seems to be thunder and lightning. A storm shakes her completely.'

Wraxall let the subject drop. Old Dangerfield puzzled him at this moment. Of course the English had the knack of concealing their feelings; but he had expected something different in Rollo this morning, if the story about the Talisman were true. He resolved on a direct attack.

'I met young Stickney at breakfast. He said something about the Talisman.'

Old Dangerfield let his newspaper slip from his hand as though he were tired of holding it.

'Freddie? Oh, Freddie can be trusted to know all about everything. He's often right, too, quite often. Yes, the Talisman's gone.'

The old man's voice was completely indifferent; he might have been discussing some matter of no especial concern, for all the interest that showed in his tone. The American was taken aback. These English, he reflected, don't give much away. Here was a man who had lost overnight the thing that he evidently valued as the first among his possessions; and yet he showed less emotion than he might have done if a cat had gone astray. Wraxall's opinion of Rollo Dangerfield went up considerably. There was a dignity behind this indifference which impressed him deeply. No fuss, no excitement to be seen. The thing was gone; but the old man could

hold himself in. His guests wouldn't be disturbed by him. Everything would go on as usual at Frickheim. Rollo Dangerfield evidently carried the courtesy of a host to the extreme.

'That's a big loss,' said Wraxall, slowly. 'But I expect you're counting on getting it back. It would be difficult to dispose of. It would certainly be hard to sell. Still, aren't you sorry you didn't close with my offer last night?'

Rollo Dangerfield turned an inscrutable face to his guest.

'Sorry I didn't sell the Talisman while I had it?' No, it never was for sale. That matter didn't arise.'

The American persisted.

'I suppose the police have some clue.'

The old man shrugged his shoulders slightly.

'The police have nothing to do with it. How could they have a clue?'

Wraxall was frankly astonished.

'You haven't called them in?' Why, I should have thought the very first thing to do would be to get them to work while the scent was fresh.'

A faint shade of irritation showed in Rollo Dangerfield's eyes, the first sign of emotion the American had seen. But when he spoke, his voice was as indifferent as before.

'Why should we call in the police? The Talisman will find its way home without their help. Would you bring the police among your guests, stir up trouble, make everyone uncomfortable with suspicions and cross-questioning? No, Mr. Wraxall, we shan't need the police at Frickheim. I told you so, before the Talisman disappeared, and you obviously didn't believe me. But you see now that you were mistaken, I meant what I said.'

The American was shrewd enough to see what had given offence. Old Dangerfield resented the slight on his veracity much more than the loss of the Talisman. He made amends frankly.

'Quite right, Mr. Dangerfield. Honestly, I thought you

were just leading us on, that night I took it that you were pulling my leg. It seemed to me that perhaps it was one of your English jokes, just put out to see if the stranger would swallow it. We often do that ourselves, over there. But I see you mean it, right enough, now.'

Rollo Dangerfield reassured him with a faint smile.

'I see your point of view. I ought to have thought of it in that light.'

Wraxall considered for a moment or two before speaking again.

'I think I see what's in your mind,' he said, going back to the earlier subject. 'You've reason to suspect somebody in particular—one of the maids perhaps—and you don't want a fuss?'

'I don't suspect any of the maids—or any of the servants,' Rollo Dangerfield replied instantly. 'That's quite out of the question. I can tell you why. We have a number of old habits at Ironsheim—and fortunately one of them has enabled us to clear our servants of any suspicion in this affair.'

He took out his case and lit a cigar before continuing.

'The servants' quarters are all in the west wing of the house—and there is only one door communicating between their section and the other part of the building. That door has a special lock of which only the butler has a key, and it is his duty at half-past eleven every night to see that that door is secured. After that no servant can get into this part of the house without his knowledge.'

'And the butler himself?' demanded the American.

'The butler's great-grandfather was born on the estate—and for four generations we have known absolutely everything about the family. This man has been in our service since he was a boy, and a more absolutely honest man you couldn't find anywhere. You may put him completely out of your calculations, Mr. Wraxall. I say that definitely, because the man can't speak for himself. Not a trace of suspicion could attach to him. Now are you satisfied?'

Wraxall nodded his acquiescence. Then he asked a further question

'How did you hear that the Talisman had gone?'

'The butler told me this morning. His first business is to go round the house after he has unlocked the communicating door. When he went into the Corinthian's Room he noticed that the Talisman case was open, and the jewel was gone. He came at once and told me.'

'And you suspect nobody, then?'

Rollo Dangerfield raised himself slightly in his chair and looked round directly at Wraxall's face. For the first time, the American saw a keenness in the old man's blue eyes, though their expression was inscrutable.

'No, I suspect nobody. I have no evidence, and I do not wish to collect any. The Talisman will be back in its place within a week, and that is the only important thing in the case. For all I know, the whole affair may be a practical joke. Some of these young folk may have taken it into their heads to test the Dangerfield legend.'

His eyes scanned the American's features, but Wraxall betrayed nothing under the scrutiny. Rollo Dangerfield pulled at his cigar before continuing.

'I can imagine one of these youngsters playing a practical joke like that. Take away the Talisman and see what old Dangerfield will say! It's quite possible that somebody'—he glanced again at the American—'may even now be wishing he had left the thing alone and may be looking for a chance to replace it under the bell. It's an awkward thing to have in one's possession— even innocently. Well, they can easily put it back again, if they wish to do so. Nobody's watching the Corinthian's Room.'

A faintly sardonic expression crossed his face.

'Don't distress yourself unduly about the Talisman, Mr. Wraxall. It will come home quite safely in the end, you may take my word for that.'

With a gesture as though asking permission, he picked up

his newspaper again. Wraxall accepted the tacit dismissal and wandered out into the sunlit gardens. The interview had given him a good deal to think about, apparently. He avoided the other guests and spent a considerable time in going over old Dangerfield's words, so far as he could remember them.

'I wonder,' he said to himself at last. 'I wonder if the old man suspects anything. One or two of these remarks might have been directed to my address, though he was clever enough to give them an inoffensive turn. If he really suspects me, it looks like being a pretty kettle of fish. It certainly looks like that'.

He thought it tactful to absent himself for the rest of the day, taking his car and visiting some of the local antiquities which he wished to see. It was dinner-time before he met his fellow-guests once more.

Eileen Cressage had returned, and Westenhanger came into the room immediately after her. As they sat down, Freddie Stickney's eyes travelled round the table, obviously counting the number, and a certain disappointment appeared in his face when he found only twelve persons present. Eric Dangerfield and Mrs. Brent were still away.

'You and Mr. Westenhanger came up by the same train, didn't you, Miss Cressage?' asked Mrs. Dangerfield.

Westenhanger caught the question which Eileen had missed.

'Yes. I happened to run across Miss Cressage just as she was coming out of Starbeck, the jewellers. We had just time to get to the station.'

Freddie Stickney's sharp ears caught the careless remark 'Starbeck's?' he said, lifting his voice to make it carry down the table. 'That's a convenient firm. They'll give you a reasonable advance on any little bit of jewellery you don't happen to need for a time. Sort of superior brand of West End Uncle, aren't they? I've dealt with them once or twice myself and always found them generous.'

Freddie was quite shameless in money matters. But his deliberately pitched sentences reached Eileen Cressage's ears; and Freddie, keenly on the look-out, noticed that the girl flushed uncomfortably.

'That shot went home,' he reflected, complacently. 'One can always get the information one wants if one goes about it tactfully. She's been doing a bit of quiet pawning this afternoon. That's interesting. I wonder what she put away in store. She never wore any jewellery here.'

He ruminated on this problem for a time, keeping his sharp eyes on the girl's face, but nothing further of interest fell into his net during the meal.

As they passed into the drawing-room after dinner, Mrs Caistor Scorton picked up a telegram addressed to her which was lying in the hall. At the sight of it, Morchard's face lighted up with interest and he examined her closely while she read it. He edged himself up to Eileen and put a question in a low voice:

'The Scorton's got her telegram about your cheque. Is it all right?'

'Quite all right, thank you,' said the girl, coldly.

She moved away from him immediately, and as she sat down, Conway Westenhanger came up.

'Have a game at bridge, Miss Cressage? They're making up a table and I've reserved a place for you.'

'No thanks. I'd rather not play.'

Mrs. Caistor Scorton passed close to them and Eileen made a gesture to catch her attention.

'You found my cheque all right, Mrs. Scorton?'

Westenhanger, to his surprise, detected more than a tinge of irony in the question. Mrs Caistor Scorton seemed taken aback for a moment; but she recovered herself almost at once:

'Oh, quite all right, quite all right,' she confirmed shortly, and passed on to the bridge-table.

Eileen Cressage knitted her brows slightly as she looked after her. At any rate, she had got out of that difficulty. Morchard had been quite right. The woman had obviously sent the cheque off to her bank and asked them to wire if it had been met. That apparently inevitable scandal had passed over safely. She glanced across at Morchard and an angrier flash came into her eyes. She knew what sort of a person he was too.

Freddie Stickney drifted over and sat down between her and Westenhanger.

'Heard the news, you two? The Talisman's out of print, it seems. No copies available for the public. Somebody's taken a fancy to it and simply lifted it. That's a fine end to all the Dangerfield talk isn't it?'

With a certain ill-suppressed maliciousness he gave them all the information he had collected during the day.

'Just as well you were away last night, Westenhanger,' he wound up. 'You're clear of suspicion. But all the rest of us are in it up to the neck. Servants exonerated without a stain on their character. Strong suspicion attaches to every guest. That's how the land lies.'

Oh, indeed, Freddie? said Westenhanger. 'Then, if we must suspect somebody, we may as well begin with yourself. What about it?' Anything you say will be used against you at the trial without regard for age or sex. Where's my notebook?'

It's all very well for you, protested Freddie. 'You're out of it all. But what about the rest of us?' It's a nasty idea to feel that the person sitting next to you in this room may be a thief.'

Westenhanger looked him up and down for a moment before replying.

'If I were you, Freddie, I don't think I'd begin flinging words like "thief" about quite so early in the day. These things are apt to be resented by some people. Isn't there any other possible explanation?'

Freddie pondered for a while in silence, then he made a half-hearted suggestion:

'It might be a practical joke.'

Westenhanger considered the idea and rejected it almost immediately.

'I shouldn't like to have the taste of the man who played a joke of that sort. Who's your humorist? Douglas is the funny man of the company, but Douglas wouldn't play a trick of that sort on anyone. That's certain. Morchard hasn't that kind of mind. The American has a sense of humour, but not that sort, I'm sure. You don't attribute it to one of the girls, do you? No? Well, then, that leaves us with . . . let's see . . . with Mr. Frederick Stickney as the only possible culprit. I don't think much of your taste in humour, Freddie, and that's a fact.'

'All the same,' said Eileen Cressage, 'I'd prefer it to be a case of practical joking rather than the other thing. Perhaps it will all come right and we shall find the Talisman back again in a few days, just as Mr. Dangerfield said.'

Freddie had recovered from Westenhanger's attack.

'Well, I'm going to find out who did it,' he declared. 'As things stand, we're all under a cloud. I'm going to get the whole lot into the billiard room later on, if I can, away from the Dangerfields; and I shall put it to them straight that each person ought to account for his doings during the night. Nobody could object to that.'

He glanced at the girl for support and was surprised to see her flush and turn away as though to conceal her face.

'I don't think you'll be altogether popular if you start that kind of thing, Mr. Stickney,' she said.

Freddie's bright little eyes fastened themselves on her face; and his well-trained mind automatically set to work to draw inferences from what he saw. As his friend had said, Freddie's inferences always tended to discredit somebody or something. He had sense enough, however, to leave his conclusions unspoken.

'It's a silly idea, Freddie,' said Westenhanger, abruptly.

He also had noticed the girl's flush, but the only inference he had cared to draw was that Freddie was making her uncomfortable.

'I can't agree with you,' Freddie was emboldened by the girl's embarrassment. 'I think everyone would be only too glad to exonerate themselves from suspicion. We oughtn't to be left under a cloud if we can clear ourselves straight off. Decidedly not. I shall insist on it, and I'll point out what it will look like if anyone refuses.'

He got up and walked away from them without waiting for a reply.

Westenhanger looked across at Eileen and was puzzled by the distress which he still found in her face.

'That little beast will make trouble unless he gets his way. Miss Cressage, I think I'll have to attend his proposed inquest myself. It seems to be the occasion where an impartial and disinterested person might be useful.'

Eileen glanced at his face for a moment. He was relieved to find that she met his eye squarely and showed no signs of flinching.

'I think that would be a good plan, Mr. Westenhanger.'

'Well, I suppose we shall have to go through with it if he gets his way. And he's pretty sure to arrange it, you know. That suggestion that I will look black if anyone refuses is pretty sure to take in most of them, and the best can't stand out after that, even if they wished to.'

Chapter VI

'Now,' said Freddie Stickney, 'I think we can begin.'

He had been as good as his word. Each guest had been approached by him apart from the rest and the appropriate hint, insinuation or appeal, had been skilfully employed. They had all come willingly or not, and Freddie had them at his mercy. His beady little eyes, bright as those of a mouse, glanced from face to face in an attempt to read the expressions. Already he judged most of them were uncomfortable, and the production of discomfort was Freddie's strong card. He cleared his throat gently in preparation for his opening statement of the case as he saw it but just at that moment the door clicked and Westenhanger stepped into the room.

'Look here, Westenhanger, you can't come in just now,' protested Freddie who augured little good from the engineer's presence. 'This is a private affair.'

Westenhanger stared at him with admirably acted surprise.

'Are you getting up a charade to amuse the Dangerfield family, or something like that?' I don't think much of the notion but I'm quite *à l'aise* to join if all the rest of you are in it. Go ahead, don't let me interrupt.'

He selected a chair near Helen Cressage and sat down. Freddie bit his lip in vexation. Westenhanger's entrance had taken him aback, he had not bargained for the presence of anyone except those who came under suspicion. For a moment he thought of arguing the point and contesting Westenhanger's right to be there at all but a glance at the engineer's face showed him the uselessness of any such at-

tempt. Quite obviously Westenhangar meant to sit through the business.

'Get on with it, Freddie,' directed Douglas Fairmile, impatiently. 'You can't expect us to sit here all night merely to look at you, can you?'

Freddie cleared his throat again, and launched into his exposition; but the two interruptions had flustered him a little and he failed to make his points tell as heavily as he had hoped.

'You all know the Dangerfield Talisman's disappeared. The burglar alarms were all found correctly set in the morning, so obviously nobody could have got into the house from the outside. That limits the thing down to the people in the house. I think that's plain.'

'Quite plain,' commented Westenhangar. 'Self-evident, in fact. Proceed, Freddie.'

'The inmates of the house can be divided into three . . .'

'Just like ancient Gaul, eh?' Douglas explained.

Freddie scowled at the interruption and repeated his phrases.

'The inmates can be divided into three groups. First, there's the Dangerfields themselves; second, the servants; third, the guests—ourselves. The Dangerfields don't come into the matter. There's no reason why any of them should take away the Talisman. That it's a fact that none of the servants can be suspected. At least, so the Dangerfields say, and they ought to know. That leaves ourselves. One of us must have taken it.'

He glanced round the group in the hope that, even at this early stage in the inquiry, someone might betray himself. Morchard was leaning back in his chair, lazily following the movement of a smoke-ring which he had blown by accident. Mrs. Caistor Scorton was obviously bored. Nina and Cynthia were trying to repress smiles—evidently the results of some whispered aside by Douglas which Freddie had failed to catch. As for Wraxall, even an expert poker-player

could have made nothing of his inscrutable mask. Eileen Cressage looked white and tired: and there was something in her face that encouraged Freddie to think that here he had found the weak point in the circle. Quite evidently she dreaded something to come, but she seemed to be hoping that the danger might yet be averted. Westenhanger, of course, showed nothing, since he was the solitary individual whose innocence was beyond doubt.

'Now there are two possible explanations of the Talisman's disappearance,' Freddie continued. 'One is, that it's due to a practical joke. We all know how the Dangerfields boast about taking no precautions with the Talisman. Somebody here may have wanted to give them a lesson about that. That's a possibility. But if that's the explanation, I think we have something to say. Joke or no joke, the thing's gone, and until it turns up again, every one of us is under suspicion of theft. Every one of us!'

He glanced round the faces once more, but still no one betrayed any definite sign of guilt. Eileen Cressage's expression puzzled him. She looked up and caught his eyes for a moment, but it was he who turned away first, so manifest was the dislike in her glance. Quite evidently the girl had something to conceal, and Freddie grew more determined to bring it to light, whatever it was.

'Just a moment, Mr. Stickney,' the American interrupted as Freddie was about to continue. 'Let's be accurate, if you please. You said "Every one of us." That's not correct. Mr. Westenhanger can't be included. He couldn't have had any hand in the affair, on your own showing.'

The engineer acknowledged the American's statement with a quick smile. Wrayall, evidently, was a kindred spirit, bent on spoiling Freddie's little effects.

'Very well,' snapped Freddie. 'Then it's one of us here, excluding Westenhanger.'

Rather to Westenhanger's surprise, Morchard joined the critics.

'Wrong again,' he declared, weightily. 'Mrs. Brent was in the house that night; and she isn't here. I agree with Mr. Wraxall. Let's be accurate.'

'Well, well,' snarled Freddie, 'have it as you like. The main point is that everyone here, bar one, is under suspicion. And whether it's a practical joke or not, it looks like plain theft. And that's a very unpleasant business, very unpleasant to us all—to myself at any rate. It's very unfair. And if this thing isn't cleared up as soon as possible it'll leave a permanent stain on our characters. You know how people talk.'

'I hear you, Freddie,' interjected Douglas, and Freddie was annoyed to see Nina Lundale's lips twitch in a repressed smile.

'It's no laughing matter,' he said, indignantly. 'Far from it. Somebody in Friockheim took the Talisman, that's certain. Now all I suggest is that we should each voluntarily account for our time during the period when the thing was stolen. That's no hardship to anyone. I'm quite glad to do it myself; and I'm sure everyone else in my position will be just as glad. If anyone here took the Talisman, let him say so now and we won't need to go any further.'

He fixed his eye on Douglas Fairmile as he spoke, more by accident than design.

'Meaning me?' inquired Douglas. 'Try again, doggie. You're barking up the wrong tree. I never touched the thing in my life.'

Freddie ignored the interruption.

'Nobody admits they did it as a joke?' he demanded. 'Then it's much worse. It's theft, pure and simple. We owe it to ourselves to clear the thing up. At any rate, that's my view, and I think it will be the view of everybody in my position to-night.'

To Freddie's surprise Morchard came to his assistance.

'There's something in that,' he admitted. 'I doubt if it'll lead to anything, but since the thing's been allowed to go

so far, I don't see any harm in letting anyone who wishes it, do as you suggest'

Freddie, looking at Fileen Cressage, saw her shoot a glance at Morchard, but as she turned her head to do so, he could not see her expression. When she turned back again he had no difficulty in reading consternation in her face. She detected that he was watching her and endeavoured with very little success, to assume an indifferent attitude. Westenhanger also had caught the by play, and his face clouded.

'Suppose you begin, then,' Freddie suggested to Morchard.

Morchard seemed rather annoyed at being directly attacked but he gave a nod of acquiescence.

Most of us went upstairs together you remember. That would be about a quarter to twelve or so. I didn't look at my watch, so I can't make it closer. Anyway, it must have been about then. We've always been pretty early at Frocksheim. Then I undressed and went to bed—midnight, say. And I woke up as usual in the morning. That's all. Help you much, Stickney?"

Freddie ignored the query and glanced round to see if anyone else would volunteer. Mrs. Caistor Scorton sat up in her chair.

'I went to my room as usual—about a quarter to twelve, as Mr. Morchard says. Some people came up a little later. I heard steps in the corridor and the sounds of doors shutting. There was some talking in low voices and more doors shut. Then the whole house was quiet. I looked out of the window for a short time, wondering if the storm was coming at last. Then I heard a noise as if someone had stumbled on the mat outside my door. I opened the door quietly and looked out. It was Miss Cressage. She was carrying a lighted candle and by the time I got the door open she was a good distance down the passage. I didn't call after her, but just shut my door again. I looked at my watch to see how late

it was, and I remember it was a quarter past twelve. After a time, I undressed and went to bed. The next thing I can remember is waking up as usual.

Westenhanger was completely taken aback by this evidence. What could a girl be doing, wandering about the house at that time of night? Almost without thinking, he swung round on Mrs. Caistor Scorton and put a question.

'You're sure it was Miss Cressage?'

'Quite sure,' said Mrs. Caistor Scorton, composedly. 'She was wearing her dressing-gown and bedroom slippers. No one else has a silk dressing-gown of that shade.'

Eileen Cressage had gone very white during Mrs. Caistor Scorton's evidence, but she made no comment. Westenhanger, looking at her momentarily, saw that she had been completely surprised. At the same time, her attitude suggested that she might have something in reserve, though she was not very confident about it. Freddie Stickney, in his turn, put a question to Mrs. Caistor Scorton.

'You said she was "going down the passage." What does that mean?'

'Miss Cressage's room is beyond mine. She was going away from it when I saw her.'

'Oh, I see,' said Freddie. 'You mean that she was going along the corridor in the direction of the bachelors' wing?'

Westenhanger saw Eileen flit in her chair at this elucidation by Freddie, but she evidently held herself in with an almost physical effort.

'Why on earth doesn't she say something?' he wondered to himself. 'I'd stake any money that she's straight, and yet she lets that little swine go on unchecked with his insinuations. I can't understand it.'

Whether she wished it or not, Mrs. Caistor Scorton had changed the whole atmosphere. Up to the moment when she began to speak, the affair had been handled in an almost frivolous spirit. Freddie Stickney had been making a fool of himself, and no one liked him sufficiently to feel troubled by

that aspect of the matter. Even the Talisman theft had not weighed over heavily as a personal thing, for nobody had any formulated suspicions in his mind. But Mrs Caistor Scorton in half a dozen sentences, had brought them face to face with a new problem, and the silence of the gul made it difficult to find innocuous explanation. Something ugly had reared up in the midst of what to most of them, had been little more than a joke. Eileen's white, strained face, and her attitude of a creature at bay, had taken away all humour from the situation. Freddie Stickney had achieved a masterpiece in the creation of discomfort. Westenhanger could see Douglas Funnik's face and in its expression he read the twin of his own feelings.

The American broke the silence, before its awkwardness grew too obvious.

"You mean that Miss Cressage was going towards the head of the main stair-case, I suppose?"

Mrs Caistor Scorton nodded without speaking.

"I understand it better when it's put in that way," said Wraxall bluntly.

Eileen Cressage threw him a glance in which Westenhanger recognised gratitude. The American had taken the edge off the situation to some extent, by his intervention. But a moment's reflection showed Westenhanger that Wraxall had merely turned the matter into a fresh and difficult channel. Down the stair-case was the way to the Corinthian's Room and the Talisman.

Before anyone else could interpose comments, Wraxall again threw himself into the breach.

"My tale's more elaborate than these two. It'll take longer to tell, I expect. I went upstairs to bed with the rest of the party, but I didn't undress just then. I felt that storm coming up, and I like storms. I wouldn't miss one. So I just sat at my window. My room's the second on the corridor in the bachelors' wing, as you go along from the stair-case. Yours is the first, isn't it, Mr. Westenhanger?"

'Yes, I'm next you'

'Your room was empty, that night, so anyone going along the corridor had to pass my door before they got to any other room. I was wide awake, at my window. I've pretty sharp ears, and I was listening hard for the first of the thunder. I heard nobody pass my door. I'd have heard anyone in the corridor. Make a note of that, Mr. Stickney. It seems important.'

He broke off and glanced contemptuously at Freddie.

'At almost exactly half-past twelve, he went on, 'the storm broke. I looked at my watch at the first thunder-clap. It was a good storm. I've seldom seen better. But from my point of view it was rather a failure, just then. I couldn't see well enough out of my window. I was losing half of it. So I got up—I hadn't undressed—and I took my candle with me because I didn't know where the corridor switches were. Nor the switches in the hall below. I'd failed to make a note of them.'

He paused for a moment as though expecting comments but no one said anything.

'I went downstairs. I wanted to get outside if I could. I didn't mean to lose any of that storm. At the main door I had a glance at the burglar alarm. It's the same pattern as I use in my own house, so I put it out of action and opened the door. It was quite dry outside then. The rain hadn't started. So I went out.'

Westenhanger was struck by an idea.

'Just a moment, Mr. Wraxall. That meant you left the door open behind you, didn't it? Could anyone have got in without you seeing him?'

Wraxall nodded approval.

'No, nobody could have got in. I had my eye on the door all the time. I was never away from it. To continue. The whole house-front was dark when I went outside except for some windows in the little tower above the Corinthian's Room. They were lit up.'

'That's Eric Dangerfield's room,' interjected Westenhanger.

'Quite right. You'll hear more about that when I come to it, but let's take things as they happened. Almost as soon as I got outside there was a terrific flash—blinding. And then the father and mother of all the thunder-claps. I found in the morning it had struck one of the trees near by. That was at twelve thirty-nine p.m. exact—I looked at my watch by the next flash which came immediately after.'

'That must have been the peal that frightened me,' Nina interjected. 'It was the loudest I ever heard.'

'Within a minute or two,' continued Wraxall, 'a light went up at the end of the east wing.'

'That was in my room,' confirmed Cynthia Pennard.

'We can ignore it for the present, then,' said Wraxall. 'I'm just giving you what I saw. About five minutes later—that would be about ten minutes to one by rough reckoning—a light appeared in the Corinthian's Room—'

'Ah!' exclaimed Freddie Stickney. 'This is getting hotter.'

'Only another of your mare's nests, Freddie,' explained Douglas. 'It was I who switched that on.'

Wraxall continued without taking any notice

'I saw a light in the Corinthian's Room and—as I was about to say when Mr. Stickney cut in—in the library which leads out of the Corinthian's Room. Five minutes later, say about one o'clock in the morning, the rain drove me indoors. I bolted the door and put on the alarm again. As I came back into the hall, someone switched on the lights, and I found young Dangerfield there. I said something about having been out looking at the storm and he nodded. Then I went upstairs and back to my room. The best part of the storm was over, so I went to bed, perhaps round about quarter past one. Like the other people I woke up as usual in the morning. That's all I can remember at present.'

The American's narrative, whether intentionally or not, had brought a relaxation of the tension in the room. By his

purely objective treatment of the matter he had produced an unconscious change in outlook among his audience. Westenhanger was relieved to see that even Eileen's face had taken on a less strained expression. She was anything but at her ease, yet there was something in her face which suggested that she had passed the worst.

Douglas Fairmile was the next to volunteer an account of his doings during the night.

'I'm no great hand at exact times and seasons,' he began. 'You'll just need to take what you get. And I'm no amateur in storms, either. If lightning leaves me alone I'll never trouble it. But that storm forced itself on my notice—and not in a quiet insinuating way, either. To be frank with you, it kept me awake. After a while I got fed up listening to it, so I thought I might as well read, since I couldn't sleep. So I padded off downstairs to get a book from the library. Mr. Waxall says it was just about one o'clock, and he knows more about it than I do. The only thing that strikes me as important in the affair is that when I switched on the lights in the Corinthian's Room, I happened to notice that the Talisman was still in its place. So that means it disappeared after one o'clock in the morning.'

He glanced at Eileen as he spoke. Westenhanger felt a wave of relief at this evidence, since it seemed to clear the girl completely, but on looking at her he was surprised to see that she showed no sign of elation. Her expression hardly indicated that she had appreciated the force of Douglas's statement.

'I picked up a book,' continued Douglas, 'and just as I was leaving the room, Eric came down his stair. We exchanged a few bright remarks about the storm—nothing worth recording—and I left him writing something at the table in the library. I must have got through the hall—I didn't bother to switch on the lights—before Mr. Waxall came inside again. And so to bed. And may I repeat, Freddie, lest you failed to catch my whisper last time, that

I did *not* steal the Talisman as I was passing. Make a note of that. It seems important, as Mr. Wraxall says.'

'I'm afraid my story doesn't help much,' said Nina Lindale, shyly, 'and it makes me out to be a terrible coward. But I've always been nervous of thunder since I was a kiddie. I didn't mind the beginning of this one—at least I tried not to mind it. But then there came a terrific flash and a perfectly awful peal of thunder, and my nerves went to pieces altogether.'

'That must have been the time the tree was struck, I expect,' said the American. 'Say twenty minutes to one?'

'Oh, don't ask me what time it was. I had other things to think about. After that, I felt I simply couldn't be alone for another minute. I got up and went next door into Eileen's room. I wanted company at any price, even if I had to knock up half the house to get it. But Eileen wasn't there. Her bed hadn't been slept in. So I thought perhaps she was in the same state and had gone to someone else's room. I rushed along to Cynthia's bedroom and burst in on her. And after that I didn't dare to go back to my own room again, so I just staved with her all night.'

'That accounts for my light being switched on, you see, Mr. Wraxall,' said Cynthia to the American. 'I've really no idea of what time it was that Nina came along to me; but it was just after that awful thunder-clap; and I expect that was the one you made a note of. Nina and I fell asleep after a while, once the storm had gone down. I don't know what time that was, either. Do you generally fall asleep with your eyes on your watch, Mr. Stickney? It seems very hard to fix any definite times for things which happen at night.'

Freddie smiled in a superior fashion.

'As it happens, I did look at my watch in the middle of the night. I went to bed at the same time as the rest; and went to sleep, too, which is more than some of you seem to have been able to do. I slept through the storm. But later on the wind got up. My window-blind began to flap badly;

and that woke me up I looked at the time to see if it was worth while getting out of bed and fixing it, or whether it wasn't worth while. That was at twenty minutes to three, I remember distinctly.'

He glanced at Cynthia triumphantly. She took up the implied challenge at once.

'Yes, Mr. Stickney, you've given us *one* time. But you haven't told us when you went to sleep. It seems to me you're no better than the rest of us, really.'

Freddie ignored her and continued his tale.

'I made up my mind to get up and fix the blind. That was at twenty minutes to three, as I said. While I was at the window I looked out. My room looks right across the court-yard to the windows of Miss Lindale's room. As I was standing at the window a light went up in the windows next to Miss Lindale's.'

He paused, and Westenhanger saw by his expression that he hoped to spring a surprise. Freddie swung round suddenly upon Eileen.

'That's your room, isn't it, Miss Cressage?'

The girl's face showed that this was the piece of evidence which she had been dreading, but she managed to keep her voice under control, as she answered:

'My room is next Nana's, and I did switch on my light sometime in the small hours. I didn't look at the time, but no doubt you're quite right about it.'

Again the atmosphere had grown tense. Westenhanger swiftly scanned the girl's face, and he was distressed to see how haggard she seemed. 'She looks just like a trapped animal,' he thought in the first flash. Then some unidentifiable trait in her expression brought a second idea to the fore. 'She looks as though he knew she's in a very tight corner, but she expects to pull out of it somehow in the end. She's pretty nearly desperate—but not quite.'

Freddie, having drawn general attention to Eileen's attitude, contented himself with completing his story.

'I looked out of my window for a short time after fixing the blind so that it wouldn't flap again. After that I went back to bed again and fell asleep almost immediately. I waked up at the usual time.'

He waited for a moment and then added

'Now if we had Miss Cressage's story we should have had everybody's version of the affair.'

Lileen rose to her feet, and they could see that she was trembling, though she kept herself under control. Westenhanger instinctively leaned forward in his chair. If the girl had some trump card in her hand, now was the time to play it. If not, then undoubtedly Freddie Stickney had put her in a bad position. She had left her room at a quarter past twelve. Freddie's evidence pointed to her coming back again at twenty minutes to three in the morning, and switching on her light as she re-entered her room. What could any girl be doing out of her bed at that time of night, and for two hours at a stretch? And, undoubtedly, from the evidence of Douglas, the Talisman might have disappeared during the time she was moving about the house. No matter where she had been, it looked a bad business, and yet Westenhanger could not help feeling that there must be some explanation.

'That girl's straight,' he repeated to himself. 'She's over-straight if anything by the look of her. And yet she's got herself into some deadly hole or other.'

Then an idea suddenly flashed into his mind.

'Suppose she's shielding someone else? I never thought of that! But it would need to be a pretty strong motive that would make her take the thing as she has taken it.'

Before he could follow out this train of thought, Lileen's voice broke in on his reflections.

'I really haven't anything to say. It's quite true that Mrs. Caistor Scorton saw me in the corridor after twelve o'clock. I didn't know she had seen me then. And it's quite true that I switched on my light when I came back again. I don't

know what time it was then, but probably Mr Stickney is quite right. It doesn't matter much. I wasn't near the Talisman during the night. That's all I can tell you.'

Her control suddenly broke, and she moved hastily towards the door. Douglas Faumile sprang up and opened it for her to pass out. As she passed him, she could read in his face that he at least was quite prepared to take her word.

As the door closed behind her, the atmosphere of strain grew more intense. The realisation that they had narrowly escaped a nasty scene weighed upon the group, and no one seemed eager to break the silence. At last Westenhanger, feeling that the first note struck was of importance, swung round on Freddie Stickney. He ignored the events of the last few moments completely.

'Well Freddie,' he said, coldly, 'your inquest doesn't seem to have led to much. I can't congratulate you. Speaking purely as a bystander, I can't say that you've achieved anything. Take your own case. You went to bed at some unspecified hour. You say you slept through that storm. That's quite possible though some of us might have difficulty in believing you, if I can judge from the accounts I've heard of the thunder. At any rate, you tell us you waked up shortly before three o'clock and were actually out of bed at that time - *just the period when the Talisman was stolen*. You were up and about for some unspecified time. Then you went back to bed and fell aleep again. Quite all right no doubt.'

His voice grew more incisive.

'But if you think you've cleared yourself of suspicion by telling that tale, I may as well sweep away your illusions. If a detective were working on this case, he'd simply ignore your whole yarn—except one solitary point. He'd take Miss Cressage's word that she switched on the light in her room, and he'd believe you when you say you saw that light go up. That's the only point where there's the slightest confirmation. And Miss Cressage is the only person who could clear

you, if it happened to turn out that the Talisman disappeared about three o'clock in the morning.'

He shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

'You seem to have the foggiest notion of evidence, Freddie. Anyone could have foreseen this sort of thing. Even a child would know that at night, in a house like this, it's almost impossible to establish a decent alibi. Nina and Cynthia are the only two of you who have established cast-iron alibis; and that was due to a pure accident—the thunderstorm.'

'That's true,' said Wraxall, before Freddie could reply. 'That's quite correct, Mr. Westenhanger. Nobody could get an alibi under these conditions, in the normal way. I quite agree with you that this little playlet hasn't been a success. By no means. I think we'd be well advised to forget all about it.'

Douglas Fairmile laughed at the sight of Freddie's expression; and with that laugh, the tension was released again. Douglas's mirth seemed infectious, following so closely on the strain of the last quarter of an hour.

'Well, I'm glad you can't suspect *me*,' said Nina Lindale with a faint smile. 'I never thought a thunderstorm would clear my character. I suppose I ought to be thankful.'

'Ditto!' added Cynthia, lightly.

Westenhanger returned to the attack in a sardonic tone.

'One thing I noticed, Freddie: You didn't go the length of denying that you stole the Talisman yourself. An oversight, probably. Oh, don't trouble to do it now; it would look rather too much like an after-thought. Besides, no detective would take your word for it—with that look on your face.'

'"Detected Guilt, or The Sinner Unmasked"—what?' jeered Douglas. 'Freddie, you'd make the fortune of a problem painter if he got hold of you just now. "Did He Do It?" That would be the title. Picture of the wily fellow who takes charge of the whole investigation and then leads all the sleuths on the wrong scent while he makes off with the swag, eh? Priceless!'

The three men had turned the tables on Freddie, and he had the wit to recognise the fact. The whole effect of his efforts had been nullified by this last touch of ridicule, which made a special appeal after the earlier tension. He nodded sulkily, as though admitting an error; but he made no direct reply to Westenhanger.

Nina Lindale gave the signal for the company to break up.

'I'm off to bed,' she announced, unsuccessfully trying to conceal a yawn. 'I got very little sleep last night, and if I stay up any longer I shall doze off in my chair.'

'That's a sound idea, Miss Lindale,' said Wraxall. 'I begin to remember that I lost some sleep too, last night.'

Morchard and Mrs. Caistor Scotton joined the group which was moving toward the door. Cynthia linked her arm in Nina's and was turning away when Douglas called her back and spoke to her in a low voice.

'What a thoughtful child it is!' they heard her say, in mock admiration. 'And did you imagine I hadn't thought of that long ago? Don't worry!'

She hurried after her companion. Freddie Stickney, left alone with Douglas and Westenhanger, shuffled for a moment or two and then retired to the door.

'I'm going to bed,' he said, reaching for the handle.

'Right, Freddie,' said Douglas, making a pretence of consulting his watch. 'I've taken the time. Set your alarm clock every quarter of an hour and jot down that you were in bed each time when you woke up. It'll be an invaluable memorandum if anything happens to go astray to-night. Bye-bye. If you feel one of your ears burning, don't fret. It will probably be me saying what I think of your exploits.'

Freddie suppressed a snarl and went out. Westenhanger dropped into a big lounge-chair and pulled out his pipe.

'Sit down, Douglas; it's early yet.'

Douglas picked out a convenient seat, near enough to allow a low-voiced conversation.

'I asked Cynthia to drop into Eileen's room and tell her what we thought of things. Couldn't leave the girl imagining we believed she was a wrong 'un, could we? And she might have thought that, cutting off when she did. Cynthia was going to see her off her own bat, it seems. Sound girl, Cynthia, she'll do it tactfully. Some people might make a bad break in a case like that.'

Westenhanger acquiesced silently, and filled his pipe before he spoke again.

'Damnable business, that,' he said at last. 'And if we'd stopped it, there would have been some sort of scene. Every-one's nerves were on edge. Anything was better than that. But what actually happened wasn't so very much better after all. That girl was as near cracking up as she could be. If it hadn't been for her grit, we might have had a much nastier affair on our hands.'

'One would like to wring Freddie's neck, of course,' Douglas mused aloud, 'but that would mean a row. We can't have rows. With luck, we can stifle this business, but a row would make it anybody's news. Freddie gets off this time, I'm afraid.'

'He does. I'm sorry.'

'The infernal thing is that the little sweep's right, you know, Conway. We *are* all under suspicion. I don't suspect anyone my class—not my line. But there's no getting away from it. Someone did take that damned Talisman.'

'Afraid so. The only hope that I have is that it may have been a practical joke after all, and that the joker was afraid to own up. Trusted to putting the thing back again without being spotted.'

'Possible, of course,' conceded Douglas. 'But I can't identify the prize idiot.'

'Nor can I. Well, take the other thing and see if it leads you any further—theft, I mean. I'm out of it, by pure luck. You've all the money you want. Morchard has more than's

good for him. The Scorton woman is rolling in it. I take it the girls don't come into question?"

He glanced interrogatively at Douglas, who nodded his agreement.

'Then that leaves the American and Freddie as a residue. Know anything about Wraxall, Douglas?'

'Nix, as I suppose he'd say. He's a collector, of sorts, and rolling in money, I've heard.'

'H'm!' said Westenhanger, pausing for a moment.

'Well, pass Wraxall,' he continued. 'That leaves us with Freddie. I don't like Freddie. I've nothing against his morals, for I know nothing about them. I do know he's hard up, though. But I've been hard up myself at times. That doesn't necessarily make a black mark on one's record.'

'Truc,' Douglas agreed. Then after a few seconds he added: 'Know the Scots verdict *Not Proven*, Conway? "The accused was discharged with a stain on his character. All saved, bar honour". That's how you feel about Freddie, perhaps?'

'I'm not very friendly. The way that girl was baited to-night was enough to sicken any decent person. But there's a difference between feeling like that and calling the little beast a thief, you know.'

'Not Proven; that's so.'

Westenhanger considered for a few moments as though he found it difficult to choose words for what he had to say. At last he put down his pipe.

'There's one thing, Douglas—that girl has got to be cleared. We're all mixed up in *that* affair, thanks to Freddie's infernal manoeuvres; we can't shirk responsibility. I don't know what possessed her to go roaming about the house at that time of night. Still less can I imagine why she couldn't tell us what she was after. But she's a straight girl, if ever I saw one, and we simply can't afford to let things rest as they are. I don't want to know what she was doing—and I don't much care. But the only way to clear her is to

find out who actually did the trick. It'll be a stiff business.'

Douglas looked serious.

'Stiff enough, if you ask me. If you want a Watson, I'm your man; but you'll need to supply the Sherlocking yourself. I simply haven't the brains for it. The whole affair is a complete mystery—and likely to remain so, for all the help I could give.'

'I'm not hopeful,' confessed Westenhanger at once 'The only detecting I ever did was guessing what cards were in my opponents' hands. It's not so much I expect to get anything out, Douglas. I feel one has to turn to and do what one can, or else I shouldn't be comfortable. That girl's face wasn't a happy sight to-night. It's got rather on my nerves, if you want to know.'

He took up his pipe again. Douglas said nothing, but his face showed that he understood Westenhanger's account of his feelings.

'What do you make of Wraxall?' Westenhanger demanded, abruptly.

'Decent soul, I thought. Backed us up well in the matter of sitting on Freddie.'

Westenhanger made no comment. Douglas let him smoke in silence for a while before inquiring:

'What do you think?'

'Wraxall was the only one of you who had a complete story ready to account for all his doings during the night. That's my impression about Wraxall, Douglas.'

Chapter VII

CYNTHIA PENNARD moved slightly to avoid a spot of light which had crept across the cushions of her hammock until it reached her face.

'Douglas,' she said, lazily, 'has a hippopotamus got a tougher hide than a rhinoceros? I'd like to know.'

'I've heard them both well spoken of—highly commended in fact. I'd hate to draw an invidious distinction and cause trouble at the Zoo. But why this lust for general information? It's not like you.'

Following her glance across the broad lawn, Douglas caught sight of Freddie Stickney sitting on the grass beside Mrs. Gaistor Scorton's garden-chair. Cynthia turned her head again.

'That's quite the thickest-skinned creature I ever heard of,' she explained, 'and I was only wondering which animal ought to come after him.'

'Can't you spend the day better than in thinking up insults to rhinoceroses and hippopotami? They'd wilt with shame if they dreamed you were putting them in Freddie's class. No flies on Freddie, as they say. Why so? Because they'd merely blunt their beaks if they tried to get through his hide. His fair companion's pretty tough on the surface, too. Perhaps that's why all the gnats have moved over here. Suppose we disappoint 'em by going down to the tennis-courts?'

Cynthia slipped neatly out of her hammock, and they went off together.

There was more than a grain of truth in their comments. Freddie Stickney prided himself—and justly—upon one knightly quality: he never showed a wound. The most brutal

snubbing left him quite unabashed. Coming down to breakfast after the fiasco of his 'inquest', he had encountered Eileen Cressage at the head of the stairs, and he had insisted on chattering trivialities to her all the way down. At table, his beady eyes had wholly failed to see the marked coldness with which he was treated by everyone, and he took no notice of the fact that all conversations into which he inserted himself were apt almost immediately to fade out into silence. Only Mrs. Caistor Scorton seemed to recognise his existence, and when breakfast was over, he had sought her out on the lawns.

'What do you think about this affair of the Talisman, Mrs. Caistor Scorton?' he demanded, as he sat down on the turf beside her chair.

Mrs. Caistor Scorton seemed to ruminate for some moments before replying. Then she glanced shrewdly at Freddie. Evidently she thought it worth while to draw him out.

'Oh, I don't know, Mr. Stickney. I'm not clever, like you; and I can make nothing of it, one way or the other. But I'd like to hear what you think. You've been putting two and two together, I'm sure, and I expect you've got a good idea of things.'

Freddie rose to the bait without hesitation.

'If it would interest you, I'm delighted to give you my inferences. You've got all the facts already.'

Mrs. Caistor Scorton nodded, but said nothing. Freddie corrected himself immediately.

'No, I was wrong in saying that. I've been hunting out some more evidence—things that didn't come out last night. One or two points seem to be important.'

Mrs. Caistor Scorton became more alert.

'That sounds interesting, Mr. Stickney. I'd like to hear it.'

Freddie considered for a few moments.

'I was just trying to arrange it in my mind,' he explained.

'The easiest way will be to take each person in turn, and examining the evidence we have about that person in particular. Take Eileen Cressage first. I think it's obvious that some of us know more about her affairs than came out last night.'

He looked up into Mrs. Caistor Scorton's face inquisitively as he spoke, and his voice had a hint of interrogation in its tone. Mrs. Caistor Scorton stared down at him unwinkingly.

'One would almost think you were connecting me with her, Mr. Stickney. I hardly know her.'

'Well, correct me if I am wrong,' said Freddie, brightly. 'I admit some of it's guesswork; but I believe I'm right. We'll see. Now to start with, she's hard up. That's common knowledge. People invite her to their houses out of good nature, and she stays with them to save money, living on the cheap.'

No one would have imagined, from Freddie's semi-indignant, semi-pitying tone, that this description accurately fitted his own methods during part of the year.

'I believe that's true,' said Mrs. Caistor Scorton, in a judicial voice. 'It's common knowledge, as you say. What next?'

'She lost a lot of money to you at bridge the other night.'

'That's common knowledge too. Mr. Stickney. Everyone in the room knew that. Are these your wonderful revelations?'

The quite perceptible ring of disappointment in her tone touched Freddie on the raw. He was put on his mettle, just as she intended.

'Wait a moment,' he begged. 'Let's take things as they come. She didn't pay you at the time? No. She gave you a cheque. I was watching her face closely just then. I'm a bit of a physiognomist, you know. It was as plain as print to me. That cheque was no good, Mrs. Caistor Scorton.'

Mrs. Caistor Scorton regarded him with a rather malicious smile.

'Indeed Mr Stickney?' She laughed 'Then how do you account for the fact that the cheque was met when it was presented? I paid it in immediately and my bank collected it at once'

Freddie Stickney held up his hand, asking permission to interrupt her

'Yes,' he said, rapidly, 'I suppose the cheque *was* met next day But all the same, she hadn't a spare £200 in the world that night I know the signs you can't deceive me She hadn't the cash that night But she had it next day What happened in between?'

'How should I know?'

Freddie took no notice His question had been merely a rhetorical one He continued marking each point with emphasis

'The Talisman disappeared that's what happened in between And during the night we know that Miss Ellen Crossage was out of her room at a time when the Talisman might have been stolen There's no denying that, is there? And what happened first thing next morning? Long before half of us were up, she went off to town And where did Westenhanger run across her in town? Coming out of Stricks the jewellers, the place where they'll make advances on any little trinket you've no immediate use for And your cheque was met all right'

He paused for a moment, and Mrs Caistor Scorton looked down at him curiously

'You seem very good at putting two and two together, Mr Stickney Do you enjoy it?'

Freddie seemed rather annoyed at the interruption It ruined the dramatic pause he had planned to make before his summing up

Of course I enjoy it' he replied, rather crossly 'I like using my brains Well, there's the case It seems to me to need more explaining away than we've had so far'

'It's very ingenious,' said Mrs Caistor Scorton, in a non-